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THE Hotspur of Honeysuckle;

OR,

Old Humility's Hard Road to Travel.

BY WM. H. MANNING,
AUTHOR OF "WILD WEST WALT," ETC., ETC.

CHAPTER I.

BIRDS OF PREY GATHER.

THE revolver had been cleaned with scrupulous care. Nothing had been done for empty show, but there had been an ominous purpose back of the long and patient task. Divested of every blemish it was ready for use or ornament. The metal glittered in the lamp-light like a toy, but the bullet which was discharged from its barrel would go direct to where it was pointed.

All this had been done by a woman, and she surveyed her work with manifest satisfaction.

"Small, but deadly!" she murmured. "As many times as I have fired a revolver, the weapon remains a mystery and a wonder to me. Only a little bit of metal, curiously-shaped, yet it is a potent factor in the game of life and

"HANDS UP, YOU VAGABOND!" WYOMING ZEKE REPEATED. "WE HAVE CAUGHT YOU AT LAST!"

death. The weakest of women may, with the touch of her slender finger, send a strong man out of life to—What? What lies beyond the dividing life of the known and unknown worlds? Somehow, this question often occurs to me of late. What lies beyond?"

She drew her hand across her forehead with a weary gesture, hesitated, started and laughed unnaturally.

"Fine occupation for me!" she added, irritably. "I am ashamed, yet, what can I do? I dare not look back to the past; I dare not look far ahead. The present is the only safety-point, but the wise woman looks somewhat to the morrow."

"She deliberately loaded the revolver."

"Now, then, this toy is ready for use, and I am ready for action. Old Humility shall hear from me soon—I am half-inclined to visit him to-night. Why not? I should, perhaps, be welcomed by his guests, and should have a chance to observe them. Naturally I must confront the Gold Monarch before I crush him. I can carry my revolver for protection, but I need not tell him that the cartridges were placed in it for him."

A heavy knocking sounded at the outside door.

"What now?" she asked, sharply. "Some fool coming to have his fortune told? If so, he will get a poor one; I'm not in mood to deal out pretty prophecies. Hang the fellow!—he is imperious. Perhaps I am to be warned out of town!"

It would not be her first experience in that line, and she had ample nerve, but she was well aware that if she was commanded to go on this occasion, there would be plenty of brute force back of the warning.

Western mining-towns are not noted for gentle ways, as a rule, and though this particular one had never yet done discredit to its mild name, which was Honeysuckle, there were men there in whom the rougher impulses of nature needed only a breeze to start into life.

She had been there only a short time, and when she hung up a neat sign announcing that "Madame Mystery," the French Far-Seer, was prepared to tell fortunes for a small sum, she had not expected much custom. She had been mistaken; custom came freely; and though that was not what brought her to the town, the money was very welcome.

She occupied a very good house; one which boasted a second floor; and had made considerable stir, but on this evening she did not care to see any callers.

For the third time the knocking sounded, and, heavy at first, it had grown so imperative that it brought a flash into her dark, handsome eyes.

She caught up the revolver.

"The fool!" she exclaimed. "If he does not go away, I will give him a taste of what this beauty carries!"

Toward the window she started, but the banging of a door showed that she was too late. Her servant had admitted the applicant. Madame Mystery accepted the fact philosophically, and was fairly gracious when a knock sounded at the door of her own room.

Her face brightened when she saw, not her servant, but a man apparently well known to her. She arose, gave him her hand cordially, said a few graceful words, and then escorted him to a seat.

Hostess and visitor were alike of striking appearance.

She was probably thirty years old. In form she was tall, well-developed and, even to a critical feminine eye, satisfactory; in facial appearance she had undeniable beauty, albeit of a hard, unwomanly kind; and an abundance of very black hair, black eyes, shapely hands, graceful manners and becoming, though black, garments made her fit for any society, as far as looks went.

His age could not have varied much from hers, and he, too, was tall, well formed, dark, well-dressed and easy of manners. They would have made a noticeable couple anywhere, but above all other things conveyed by their appearance was the general air which said to critical eyes: "We are for ourselves, first, last and all the time. If the good things of life are to be had, we will have them without regard to the means."

The visitor was a stranger in Honeysuckle, but Madame Mystery knew him well. His name was Cole Boylston.

"So you are in Honeysuckle, at last," she observed.

"Yes; I thought I would run down and join you."

"Satan came also," calmly quoted the lady.

"Thanks; you compliment me highly. What is the situation in camp?"

"It is a night of revelry at the Gold Monarch's house."

"In what way?"

"One Eben Wilberley, a lawyer from the East, and his niece, Lorraine Wilberley, are now sojourning here, and Old Humility is giving a party, or some kind of blow-out, in their honor, to-night."

"Humph! old Hodge grows giddy in his old age."

"He has a daughter, you know."

"I do know. Fair Agnes! She is a jewel!"

"Don't waste your fragrance on the desert air, Cole. Agnes is as good as lost to you. Childeric Hall, the schoolmaster, has a mortgage on her hand, and, report says, is soon to foreclose. Love waxes strong and blooms in Honeysuckle like the green bay tree. I notice that Wyoming Zeke, the so-called Hotspur, was out riding with Lorraine to-day, and that may be significant."

"All these persons are unknown to me," replied Boylston. "Who are they? I intend to stop here awhile, and I want to know the finger-posts by the roadside."

"Wyoming Zeke is a long-haired, reckless fellow, a barbarian right from the grizzly bear ranges, or cattle-ranches, or State's Prison—I don't know which. He is handsome and dashing, goes well-dressed and well-armed, and would be a bad man to run up against. He appears to be a mere wandering adventurer, but report says he is of good family."

"Humph! Next!"

"Childeric Hall, as before said, is a schoolmaster. When Old Humility found a town growing up around his mine, and children toddling about the streets, he forthwith declared that the youngsters must be educated. He fished Hall up out of some academy pond, and installed the learned trout as master of a school here, which he has since maintained at his own expense. Hall is not dashing, like Wyoming Zeke, but he has a mighty brain."

"Next!"

"Now cometh Old Humility, the Gold Monarch, whose correct name is Eliphalet Hodge; mine-owner; ten times a millionaire; a big, clumsy, awkward, child-like, honest old fellow, who runs Honeysuckle by the mere force of his goodness—"

"And money!" severely interrupted Boylston.

"Skip Hodge. Next!"

"Then his daughter, Agnes, beautiful as a wild rose, as good as her father—"

There was a sneer in Madame Mystery's voice, but her companion devoutly interrupted: "All this I steadfastly believe. She is an angel! Next!"

"You shamefully curb my chances for eloquence. I have said that Eben Wilberley, lawyer, and his regal niece, Lorraine, are here as travelers. That finishes the nabobs of whom you will care to hear. The small fry are beneath my notice."

"So Old Humility gives a blow-out to-night, at which all these heavenly orbs will be present?"

"Yes."

"I am tempted to attend."

"You are a stranger."

"True, but I could soon introduce myself. A few words to Old Humility would make me known."

"I do not doubt that there is mischief afoot. Your coming to Honeysuckle proves it."

"What about your coming?"

Madame Mystery shrugged her shoulders calmly.

"There is always mystery where I am," she returned.

"I only wish," added Boylston, gravely, "that the power of mischief was mine. Now, as you are aware, there is to be a bitter fight over the county-seat. Honeysuckle wants it located here; Cottoncliff wants it located there. Who will win? Cottoncliff would have a 'snap' were it not for old Hodge and his money. He offers more in hard cash than our people can—in other words, he will build county edifices at his own expense, while we of Cottoncliff can only urge the advantage of our position. Cottoncliff is bound to grow; Honeysuckle will always be a small place."

"Are you trying to make a believer of me?"

"Deep as is my love for you, I do not care whether you believe or not; you are not on the committee which is to decide which place shall be the county-seat."

"No; I am too well informed—so well informed that I believe your claims to be absurd. If either town ever gets a move on it sufficient to be a decent-sized town, I shall be surprised."

"All's fair in war; our claims look and sound well. In brief, Nell, I am here—"

"Call me Madame Mystery."

"Just as you say, Nell. I am here as the agent of the Cottoncliffers. The first meeting of the august committee took place a few days ago, and the rival towns had their ambassadors there, but the committee would not listen to us. Old Humility, instead of attending the meeting, sent substitutes. They conveyed his offers, but were snubbed; the committee would take nothing second-hand, and sent for Hodge. The old gent returned word that very important business prevented."

"Humph!" muttered Nell, in a peculiar way.

"He came near losing the whole case thereby, and if one of the committee had not been obstinate, I think Cottoncliff would have won. As it was, the committee went away in disgust, and the meeting was postponed. Hodge must be there to urge his own case, and make his own offer, they say."

"And are you here to urge him to do it?"

"Hardly! We think he is weakening, and I am come to make him an offer to haul off."

"Honeysuckle wants the county-seat bad!"

"So does Cottoncliff."

"Do you think you can bluff Hodge out of it?"

"Frankly, I don't believe we can. That does not mean that Honeysuckle is to win, however."

"Cole, you could afford to deal handsomely with a person who would help you to subdue this Wild West Croesus."

"Yes; but where am I to find him?"

"My unsophisticated friend, never look for a 'him' when you have delicate work to do. Men are well enough in a prize-fight, or at a whisky-bar, but that is all they are good for. In matters of diplomacy always choose a female ally, if you want the work well done."

"I know that your sex is as deceitful as Judas," replied Boylston, with uncomplimentary candor, "but what has that to do with this case?"

"Being a case which requires brains, not muscle, you want an ally of about my build."

"Can you help me?" was the eager inquiry.

"I can try."

"In what way?"

"My dear sir, I have boasted of woman's shrewdness. Do you want me to give the lie to my claim by divulging the plan which I have in mind? Hardly! If I work, I work on my own lines, solitary and alone. I think that I can influence Mr. Eliphalet Hodge. Shall I try?"

"Most decidedly, yes."

"Then I will go there at once!"

CHAPTER II.

THE MESSENGER OF EVIL.

MADAME MYSTERY arose, but Boylston regarded her in surprise.

"I thought you said that there was a reception at old Hodge's house, to-night," he observed.

"So there is," Nell answered.

"Isn't it an unfavorable time to apply?"

"Not in the least. I am content to make haste slowly, and am not fool enough to rush into the house and order him to bend the knee to me and give up the county-seat. Slow and steady is the word. I want to see him and his bosom friends, and make their acquaintance in orthodox order. I shall probably put a flea in Eliphalet's ear to-night, but the pinch of the shoe will not come until I know the ground under the sole."

"I don't understand your plan."

"Nor is it necessary that you should."

The Far-Seer was preparing to go out. Her manner was calm and careless, but Boylston watched her suspiciously. He knew her of old, and would not have risked much money on her loyalty to his cause. Her own interests ranked high with her, and no ally was sure of her allegiance unless his interests and hers ran in the same channel.

He made no objection to her departure. It was not likely that she would do him any harm, and she was shrewd enough to be of service if she saw fit.

"I presume you go as a fortune-teller," he observed.

"Yes."

"Are people here foolish enough to believe in you?"

"They are kind enough to pay for my prophecies. The old clap-trap is gone from fortune-telling, and folks no longer make up like frights to read the future. I have practiced my profession in New York, in Honeysuckle, and in places of all intermediate sizes, and I never failed to make a good living as Madame Mystery, the French Far-Seer."

"Folks like to be humbugged."

"And I like to do it!"

By that time she was ready to go out.

"Shall I loan you a revolver?" he asked.

She exhibited the glittering weapon she had so carefully prepared before he came.

"Should I be Spitfire Nell if I did not go 'heeled'!" she asked, coolly. "Look upon that bit of stuff! Before I am done with Honeysuckle, this revolver will have a reputation which will make a great stir around this benighted region."

"All right, my charmer. As usual, you have a grudge to wipe out, and I'll wager the last grain of 'dust' in my belt that you make him sick—him, for, of course, it's a man. You have a great faculty for perforating men. Women, you polish off by breaking their hearts; that is art. Men, you fill up with lead; that is good aim."

She had been standing near the door, and he walked to the lounge and lay down.

Madame Mystery was in an amiable mood, and his compliments, carelessly uttered as they were, pleased her. At the close she smiled upon him, dropped a courtesy, kissed her hand to him and opened the door.

"Dear old boy! she murmured, "you deserve well, and I may possibly bring good news. I hope so. Vale!"

With this erudite farewell, she left the house. There was a good deal of the dare-devil spirit in her errand. She did not expect to do Boylston any good, but the impulse had seized her to

visit Eliphalet Hodge's house, and not only have sport at the expense of those present, but observe them to her own advantage.

She made the short journey without adventure.

Mr. Hodge owned a house which was both large and fine, in comparison with other buildings of the mining-camp, but it would have been humble enough if situated in a more civilized place. Its owner was a man whose nature was as simple as that of a child, and as frank and gentle as the sunshine which, in pleasant weather, colored Mount Anvil, just beyond the collection of buildings, with golden light. He would not have felt at home among finery, and surrounded with pomp, and there was none under his roof.

Madame Mystery had anticipated some trouble in gaining entrance, but there was none. Invitations had been sent out, and it was the intention to limit the guests to a certain number, but if a beggar, or a homeless dog, had happened along, Eliphalet Hodge would not have turned him away—it was not in the man's big heart to do it.

The alleged Far-Seer entered unchallenged, and with steady steps and perfect composure she passed to the room where the guests were seated in pleasant, social conversation. Words died away upon their lips when she appeared, for it was a great surprise. Tall, stately and graceful, she passed beyond the door and then paused. Every gaze became fixed upon her. Nearly all of those present recognized her as the French fortune-teller. None had ever sought her presence to have the future unfolded, but they had seen her walking on the street.

She was not kept waiting long. Mr. Hodge was surprised, but he courteously arose and approached her.

He was a man of striking appearance. Not tall, he was rendered much shorter in appearance by a remarkable physical development. His heavy shoulders were set far apart, and separated by a chest of magnificent breadth and fullness; his arms were long and powerful; his hands were surprisingly large; and in every way he gave evidence of great strength. Sixty years of life had left his hair and beard of a grizzly color, and the lack of barber's shears had left them surprisingly shaggy. He was a homely man. His face was red; his nose large; his every feature slightly out of proportion; and yet he was not repulsive. Quite the reverse; the good humor and honesty that beamed in his rugged countenance were better than so-called "beauty."

Honest he was to a marked degree, and as genial and simple as man could be, and yet be intelligent. Big, clumsy, awkward and patient, he was a man to admire, if he was lacking in some things.

Such was the host who advanced to meet Nell. "Beg yer pardon," he said, as though he really ought to apologize, "but can I do something for ye?"

"Yes," she answered, quickly; "let me tell your fortune!"

He gave a slight start and answered:

"Eh?"

The reply, such as it was, was worthy of notice, for it was in a doubtful way, which showed that, if he understood, he did not fully realize the meaning of her words. It was not her purpose to talk with him first, and she did not press her attack on his simple nature. She turned to the guests and spoke in a dramatic way:

"If any one here wishes to know the future, let him, or her, speak. I am gifted with the power of unlocking the gates of the time-to-come. In my veins runs the blood of a race of seers, and I have all the olden power. To me the future lies open, and I am ready to reveal it to all who wish. I am no pretender, nor am I one who thinks necessary to cover merit with a robe of what is weird and mystic, to add to the effect. My ways are plain and to the point, and I request permission to mark out for you the things that are to be."

Madame Mystery was cunning. She knew that few persons were ignorant enough to believe in her "art," and doubted if one believer was there. If she obtained any custom, it would be because the young folks desired sport. Such being the case, the simplest way was the best.

She was not surprised when a tall, dashing-looking young man moved promptly forward. She recognized him to be Zeke Ralston, otherwise called Wyoming Zeke.

"Let me be the victim," he carelessly answered. "The future crowds the present all too fast to suit me. It is a pirate that hurries us to an untimely end. I hate it, and if I can get the drop on it, I will. Tell me, fair priestess, of the things to come, and, when they get along, I shall be able to recognize them as old friends, instead of being taken by surprise."

That he was an unbeliever was certain, but Nell was not in the least disposed to snub him. On the contrary, the gallant young man actually created a flutter in her feminine heart. If she had said what was in her mind she would have replied: "I hope that all good things will be your lot, and I will try to make it so if you will take me to share your fortunes!" Policy, not modesty, colored the reply which she did make:

"All this shall be told you, but will you believe?"

"With proof, yes."

"What proof do you require?"

"Verification of your prophecies by time."

"As I thought, you do not believe. Very well; I will convince you. There is trouble ahead for you!"

"Good! I felt sure that you would not give me a disagreeable prognostication."

"You have lately made the acquaintance of a woman who is destined to cause you much difficulty."

"I have just met you!"

Wyoming Zeke spoke lightly, and had little idea how sharply he was shooting. When Nell came in he had been sitting beside a young lady whom she knew to be Lorraine Wilberley. The Far-Seer had observed closely, and the result might have been summed up in a few words: "I admire Ralston; so does she; but, by fair means or foul, I will beat her out!" Nell had aimed the shaft at Miss Wilberley; it had recoiled upon herself.

She did not allow any confusion to appear, but, ignoring the insinuation, quietly continued:

"There is mud at the bottom of the clear-topped river; there is often deceit under a fair surface in other things. Beware of the smiles of women, for they are not always what they seem."

"I'll make a note of it."

"You are a man destined by fate for a high station in life, but you are not sure of reaching it. Like all other men, you have two roads open before you. A chance will soon be offered for you to win glory, fame, happiness. Accept this chance and all will be well; decline it, and unutterable misery to you will be the result!"

She turned abruptly away as she finished speaking.

"Who comes next?" she asked.

Wyoming Zeke smiled in an amused way. To him all this appeared to be the veriest nonsense. Madame Mystery had followed the old, old track common to those of her craft, but had been more commonplace than the average. Not an iota of novelty had been vouchsafed, and if he had not been willing to amuse the young ladies, he might have commented with some sarcasm.

The Far-Seer soon found another victim. Those of her craft usually do. Young people like sport, and there is a measure of it in any kind of novelty. All smiled, but they crowded around the alleged Frenchwoman, eagerly awaiting their turns.

She was not reluctant; whatever else might happen, she bade fair to add to her capital stock.

One by one they came to her, and her glib tongue was never at a loss. She was not so commonplace in the cases which succeeded the first. Being no novice at the business, she had a stock of predictions which had done service from New York to the Pacific Coast, and she brought them into use on this occasion with dramatic effect. To some she promised great good fortune, while others met with a gloomy prediction, but in nearly every instance, her remarks were cunningly constructed.

There was one person who did not approach to join in the gay conversation, or to have her "fortune" told, and Madame Mystery noticed the fact. Lorraine Wilberley kept her seat, and her expression betokened disgust.

She was not permitted to go unchallenged, and when the others were disposed of, the Far-Seer, with a plausible exterior covering actual hatred, spoke to her.

"Come, lady; it is your turn now!"

"Thanks," answered Lorraine, briefly; "I will not trouble you."

"If you mind the expense, I will tell your fortune for nothing!" was the sneering offer.

"You will not tell it at all."

"Why not, pray?"

"Because I do not desire it told."

"An honest person should fear nothing."

"I do not fear you, which proves the truth of your statement," returned Lorraine, with calm indifference which could not be considered a lowering of her dignity as a lady, but the pointed rejoinder brought an angry flush to the madame's face.

CHAPTER III.

STARTING A PANIC.

MADAME MYSTERY was of a passionate nature, but she knew when to curb her temper. In her opinion, she could then and there have crushed the woman who had presumed to refer to her as "nothing," but she was far too wily for that. Ideas were forming in her prolific mind, and she was so positive that she would, in the near future, be pitted against Miss Lorraine Wilberley in a battle where wits would count for everything, that she was not rash enough to show her hand at the start by a vulgar show of anger.

Evenly she answered:

"Certainly, no one need fear me, but I had thought that you would like to know your future like your friends. Since you do not, let me hope that, as events unfold in the ordinary way, none will take you by surprise."

She turned toward Eliphalet Hodge. The host had been standing at one side, looking on with a benevolent smile. He knew but little about fortune-telling, and had never thought of having his own told, but it amused the young people, and that was enough for him.

Whatever gave them pleasure met with his approval.

He suddenly found Nell's gaze fixed upon himself, and she quickly advanced to his side.

"You have not had your future, unfolded!" she observed.

"Oh! let us have Mr. Hodge's fortune, by all means!" cried a gay girl, whose ideas came and went like fitful sunshine.

The honest old man looked perplexed.

"Bless me! I don't know that I have any," he answered ingenuously.

"You have a future, haven't you?"

"A short one, young lady; a short one. The biggest half of my life lies behind me."

"But not all the romance," remarked the Far-Seer.

"The what?" asked the Gold Monarch.

"Romance. There may be stirring events in your life yet to come."

"She means the war over the county-seat," explained Eliphalet, turning to his friends with a peaceful smile.

"Let me prophesy for you," urged the woman.

"There are private, as well as public events, you know. Your life may not be all like a smooth-flowing brook."

A shadow flitted over his rugged face.

"Can you really tell what's goin' ter happen?" he asked innocently.

"I can."

"I'd so o' like ter know how the county-seat war will be settled."

"Be passive then, and let me speak."

"Go on."

There was a trace of uneasiness in his manner, and he avoided her gaze, but became as "passive" as she could wish.

"The county-seat is an unlucky affair," pronounced Madame Mystery. "I see two law-abiding places struggling for a prize which only one can win. There is trouble ahead. There will be intrigues, and, unless one party yields, there will be disaster, trouble and death. I can see an army marching from Cottoncliff toward Honeysuckle. I am not sure what their purpose is, but the size of their force indicates that there is hostility in their hearts."

"That's bad!" interjected Eliphalet, deeply troubled.

"Now I can see a town in ruins. How did it come to be so? I cannot tell. I can see blackened, in-fallen walls, and it is plain that a fire has swept through with disastrous effect, but whether it is Honeysuckle, or Cottoncliff, or some other place, I cannot say. There is ruin and death in all places—we know not where it will strike next!"

Hodge no longer avoided her gaze; he looked at her in a dismayed way which showed that, however uncertain he was, he was not an unbeliever.

She saw what an impression she had made, and that she would never have a better chance to deal the wound she wished to inflict. What she had to say was not for public ears, and as there was danger that some of the scoffers might interfere to prevent her from influencing him further, she determined to get rid of them.

"I have something to say in private," she announced, turning upon them. "Will you stand back and give me room?"

The opposition which she feared was actually working, but some of the girls beat a retreat in a playful tumult, and the more level-headed slowly followed.

Nell was left alone with her victim.

"I have something to say which is for your ears, only," she added, lowering her voice.

He changed his position uneasily.

"Ef it's about the county-seat—"

"It is about yourself. I am sorry to say that I see trouble ahead for you—your peaceful life is going to be rudely interrupted. You are like a good many other men: you have a past, and it is going to rise before you like a ghost to threaten and to menace!"

Some of the high color faded from his broad face, and a startled look was in his eyes. But he made no reply.

"I see a scene of the past," pursued the woman, affecting a little of the mysterious in her utterance and manner. "I can discern several scenes, like the shifting views of a panorama. First of all there is a court-room, with a prisoner on trial for his life. What horrible crime he has committed I know not, but dark and menacing glances are bent upon him, and, as witness after witness gives testimony against him, there are threats of violence all around him; and the man stares at his accusers in dumb dismay!"

Eliphalet Hodge trembled as though an icy wind had been turned upon him. His signs of perturbation had increased; his face was ashen, and there was a wild light in his eyes.

Obviously, the story was touching him to the quick.

"The trial is over," pursued the Far-Seer, "and the jury prepare to form a verdict. They

retire for consultation: they are gone several hours; they return with the verdict: 'Guilty, with extenuating circumstances!' The prisoner falls in a swoon!"

She paused. Hodge's hand wandered to his throat; he fumbled there as though to secure more air. Presently Madame Mystery continued:

"The next scene shows the court-room again and the prisoner is there to receive sentence. The judge informs him that he fully deserves the full penalty of the law, but, in view of the recommendation to mercy, and his previous good character, his life will be spared as far as the hangman is concerned. He goes to a living death—sentenced to State's Prison for life."

Eliphalet's head fell. He breathed heavily, and the color had swept back to his face until it was almost purple of hue. It was well that his back was toward the guests, or his appearance would have created alarm. As he looked then, so might the prisoner have looked before the judge.

He made no effort to interrupt, and the Far-Seer went on in an implacable voice:

"Another scene comes; it is a prison, and the men who are there are in striped suits. Discipline is lax, and they are allowed to mingle with each other somewhat. They confer, form and plot, and break jail. Their guards are left behind—dead. One of the escaped convicts is he whom we have seen in the prisoner's box, sentenced for life!"

Hodge was silent.

"The next scene comes after many years. The one convict in whom we are interested has defied the law, and grown old in freedom. Moreover, he has grown rich. Luck has followed him, and he has 'struck it rich.' He is a grand man, a power in all affairs of life, and reputed very honest. He could buy up one-half of this county, mines and all, if he saw fit. Such is the murderer. I have, thank Heaven! no mental picture of his victim!"

The woman's manner suddenly changed. Up to that time she had kept her emotions well under control, but her bitter hatred burst from a smoldering fire to a blaze. Her eyes flashed; her voice became hard; and her hands were clinched until the nails sunk deep into the soft flesh.

The Gold Monarch did not speak or raise his head.

"What, sir, do you think of the story?" she added, after a brief struggle with her emotions.

He tried to speak, but no words passed his lips.

"Perhaps you feel no interest?"

The instinct of self-preservation caused him to make a strong effort to regain calmness. He spoke, but his voice was low and husky:

"Why should I?"

"True—why should you?" she sneered.

"I do not know the man."

"Of course not!"

"Is he in Honeysuckle?"

"Probably not!"

"I cannot judge o' them I don't know."

"Suppose it was *your* case—what then?"

"I should be sorry."

"For whom?—yourself, or your victim?"

"Both!—both! One might be as much ter be pitied as the other."

"Murderers deserve pity, do they?"

"Thar might be sarcumstances not gineraly knowed."

"But the murder would remain a stern fact."

"S'pose he never meant ter do it?"

"Imaginary points do not count. It is what we *know*; and we know that a murder was done."

Eliphalet unconsciously drew a deep sigh.

"How the two pictures stand out in contrast! On one hand we see the lonely grave of the victim; on the other, the murderer, rich, honored, flattered, prosperous, happy—"

"How do you know he's happy?" burst forth from the Gold Monarch's lips.

"How can he be otherwise? When so many years have elapsed, he need not fear detection. Probably the prosecuting attorney, the judge, the prison-warden, and the witnesses are all dead. The only thing he now has to fear is that some lonely avenger, perhaps one who knew and loved the dead, is on his track. That haunting shadow he may well fear, for he will never be wholly safe while he lives!"

The words were suggestive, and were intended as the final turn of the screws; but Eliphalet, like a deer at bay, seemed to rally. He raised his eyes, and looked at her firmly:

"If I hear o' this man, I will let ye know."

"And help bring him to justice?"

"Sart'in."

"I shall remember your promise. I think that, by our united efforts, we can bring him to earth. To earth! That is not what is wanted! He should be elevated *above* the earth, and left to dangle in space!"

The words were spoken sibilantly, bitterly; but at that moment Wyoming Zeke advanced toward them.

CHAPTER IV. A STARTLING GIFT.

The interruption was by no means unpleasant to Nell.

She had spoken more plainly than she had in-

tended, and had found it hard to control her savage enmity; the coming of Wyoming Zeke showed her a way out of the interview before she had done even worse, and she was glad to see him.

She rallied and smiled graciously.

"Now, then, what sort of a 'fortune' are you unfolding here?" Zeke demanded. "You must be going into details with a vengeance, judging by the time you have taken."

"Great cases demand ample time," sweetly returned Madame Mystery.

"I notice you disposed of *me* quickly," retorted Zeke.

"That was because I saw so much."

"Did you? I saw only you."

It was a bit of idle flattery, but it made her eyes sparkle with pleasure.

"The view must have been disagreeable."

"You should not decry your own merits. Well, friend Hodge, have you had your future cut out to order?"

Nell flashed Eliphalet a glance which was half of a warning nature.

"Do you know, the man persists in talking about the county-seat scheme, instead of letting me read his future," she volubly explained.

"Your prophecy in regard to the county-seat must have been unfavorable; he seems to be broken up."

"A headache, I think he said," carelessly explained the Far-Seer.

"I ain't feelin' in the very best o' trim," the Gold Monarch admitted, trying to hide his agitation. "I'll be all right pretty soon, though, an' you needn't mention it, Zeke."

"Certainly not."

"My work is done, and I will leave you now," observed Nell, jingling the money which she had received for her so-called fortune-telling. "I hope fate will deal as kindly with all here as it can consistently, and if any further insight is desired into things to come, I am to be found at my office."

Once more she smiled upon Zeke.

"We will call around," he answered, carelessly.

"Do so!"

She added a few more graceful words, and then beat a skillful retreat from the house. Zeke smiled quietly.

"A great old girl, Eliphalet," he irreverently remarked.

"Yes."

"For a humbug, she is not so very bad."

"No."

These mechanical answers did not please Ralston. He saw that Hodge was ill at ease, and recognized the necessity of getting him in better frame of mind before allowing him to join his guests. Agnes, in particular, had very observing eyes, and would not be long in discovering that something unpleasant had befallen her father. Ralston did not know what it was, but he took up the case in a stout-hearted, helpful way peculiar to him. Linking his arm into his old friend's, he drew him to the window and began to talk in an animated way about the great county-seat scheme. Eliphalet's ambition was bound up in it, and that, if anything, would cause him to forget what was not agreeable.

The artifice was successful. The Gold Monarch had received food for thought of a bitter nature for many days to come, but he managed to banish his haunting fears after awhile, and when the two men rejoined the guests, he was in manner much the same as ever.

Other conversation had crowded out the fortune-teller, as it were, and the members of the company were gay enough. They were talking in a light-hearted way when a sound of shuffling feet at the parlor door caused all to look that way.

A servant had entered, bearing in his arms a rough wooden box which was about twenty inches square. Once inside the room, he stood in a state of uncertainty.

"What hev you thar, Sam?" asked Mr. Hodge.

"I don't know, but I reckon he kin tell," replied the servant, indicating Wyoming Zeke.

"I? I know nothing about it."

"But it's fur you."

Zeke arose and approached the box. It was very plain, and the only mark upon it was his name and the word "Immediate," in a neat legible hand.

"What the dickens is it?" Ralston demanded.

"I thought it might be wine, and that you had a surprise for yer friends."

"Hardly! Where did it come from?"

"Two men brought it in a light carriage."

"Where are they?"

"Gone! They drove away at once."

"Didn't you know 'em, Sam?" asked Hodge.

"Never seen 'em afore."

"Why did you bring the concern into the parlor?" asked Ralston, in disgust.

"Well, it was like this: They drove up, an' one on 'em says: 'Is Zeke Ralston here?' 'He is,' says I. 'Here is a box,' says the stranger, 'which you are ter deliver ter him right away, wherever he is. He wants it at once.' An' with that they bounced out o' doors, got inter the carriage an' drove away."

"Shall we hev it opened, Zeke?" asked the host.

"I more than half suspect a joke—"

Ralston was interrupted. Some of the young ladies saw, in their fertile imaginations, a mystery ahead, and when one had broken the ice with a request that the box be opened, nearly all joined in and made a clamor that he did not see fit to defy.

"Bring on your carpenters!" he directed, with an air of resignation. "I only hope it is not an infernal machine which will blow us all to the celestial regions."

"Perhaps your last girl has returned your letters," suggested the leading spirit among the feminine curiosity-seekers.

"If so, I will turn them over to you, and thereby save myself the trouble of writing to you."

"Indeed! I wouldn't accept them!"

"That's all very well to say while others are around."

In this way he met their badinage, but the servant appeared with a hammer and chisel, and the box was duly attacked. No explosion followed the blows of the hammer, and the possibilities of an infernal machine faded away. The cover was slowly raised, as nail after nail gave way, and the frivolous girls crowded closer. Only one nail remained, and the servant wrenched that away and lifted the cover.

Then happened something startling.

There was the sound of rending paper; a chorus of shrieks from the girls; a rapid flight to a safe distance; and then all stood staring blankly, and in silence, at the contents of the box. No wonder there was a long pause, and when Eliphalet Hodge finally broke the silence, his utterance was mechanical.

"A human skeleton!" he gasped.

Sure enough. When the pressure of the cover was removed the thin layer of paper beneath had been burst asunder, and then, precisely like a jack-in-the-box, a skeleton had shot up into view, moving like a flash of light, yet giving a dim view of disconnected bones coming from the cavity of the box, and springing into place, joint to joint, as a soldier might leap to his appointed station in time of battle on the wall of a fort.

The sight startled the boldest of the crowd, and the young ladies united in uttering those remarkable feminine screeches which have no parallel in animate, inanimate, or any other kind of nature, and cannot be counterfeited by any but the originals. But the fair damsels lost the power of utterance, not to mention that of coherent speech, and stood staring in bewilderment and dismay at the ghastly addition to their evening circle.

And there stood the skeleton, so lately packed in small compass, but now as erect as though it were the evil genius of some museum. Skeletons of all kinds had before then been seen by some of those present, but never one which, after resting in a heap in a box, could thus spring into place of its own accord.

It was a severe shock to all present. Despite their references to infernal machines and the like, no one had expected anything unpleasant, and Zeke had believed that he knew what it was, and knew it to be matter-of-fact and harmless. But with the last gloomy remnant of mortality staring at them, there was more than one pale face in the room, and the horrible visitor was the focus of every gaze.

Finally some one found voice:

"May the good Lord save us!" he uttered, solemnly.

"If this is a joke," added a severe-faced man, "it is a very poor—"

"A joke!" repeated Ralston, sharply, "do you think I would be guilty of such a villainous trick?"

"We all know you wouldn't, Ezekiel!" hastily returned Mr. Hodge, "but what in the world does this mean?"

Zeke moved impetuously forward.

"The skeleton is full of wires and springs," he explained, "and operated much like a jack-in-the-box. By my life! it is an ingenious piece of work, but if I had the maker here, I would fix him so that he would need springs to rise for the next month."

The first shock was over, and the Hotspur was as cool as ever. Well aware that the bringers of the evil gift had been allowed time to get a mile away before the box was even opened, he did not spend any time in idle talk of pursuit.

The remarkable skill with which the skeleton was put together excited his wonder. He laid his hand on its head and bore down—quietly, lightly the horrible thing sunk, the joints dismembering easily, one by one, and the whole falling steadily, like a well-regulated machine, until his equally steady pressure had forced it down into the box, where it lay, only a pile of bones, with a mass of cunning springs and wires among them. He released his hold, and the thing sprung lightly, nonchalantly, as it were, back to an erect position.

"In Heaven's name, box it up!" exclaimed one of the ladies whose gayety had been so rudely checked.

But Wyoming Zeke stooped and picked something out of the box. It was a folded paper.

"Here," he remarked, "is something which may throw a clew in our way. If it does, I will chastise the man like the cur he is. I know not whether this is meant for a joke, or otherwise, but I take it as a deadly affront. Some time since I laid a wager with a friend, the stake being a cornet. I had no more use for such an instrument than I have for butterflies' wings, but he insisted on just that stake, and I gave way. When I saw this box, and had a little time to think, I thought the cornet had come, and was willing to amuse the company. I regret now that I allowed the box to be opened here."

"Land love you!" responded Hodge, "you aint an artom ter blame. Nobody kin blame you, for the clamor literally forced ye ter comply. Ef thar is blame, we must all take our share."

While he was speaking the Hotspur had again forced down the skeleton, and he proceeded to clap on a board, drive a couple of nails and pen in the unwholesome visitor.

"Now, we will see what the paper says," he observed, as he unfolded it.

He saw words and lines written in a firm, precise hand, and read as follows:

"KNOW ALL MEN BY THESE PRESENTS that I, Benjamin Plymouth, being of sound mind and very unsound body, and feeling that I am near the hour of dissolution, do hereby set my name to this document and declare it to be my last and official will and testament. I have nothing to bequeath in the way of real estate or ready money, but such as I have give I unto those I hereby make my heirs.

"To my friend, Ezekiel Ralston, known as Wyoming Zeke, I bequeath the mistaken faith in human nature which has been the bane of my life and the ruin of my hopes.

"To my friend, Ezekiel Ralston, as aforesaid, I give and bequeath all rights, claims and mortgages to the love of a certain woman whom he will not find it hard to identify, even though she is not here mentioned by name. She has come hundreds of miles to fulfill the destiny which decreed that they should meet; she will make herself well known before she is done with him. He will find her love a curse, and misfortune will dog his steps as long as he keeps her company. Even with this warning, he will not seek to avoid his fate. He has looked upon her fair, deceitful face; he has heard the fatal music of her siren voice; he has basked in the warm radiance of her bewildering smile, and can no more turn back than can the voyager stay his craft when once within the whirlpool's grasp.

"To my friend, Ezekiel Ralston, as aforesaid, I give and bequeath my bones, when I am done with them, as a token of the distinguished consideration I entertain for him; and I direct my executors, when I am done with life, to prepare these bones in a way by me dictated, and to forward the same to the aforesaid Ezekiel Ralston. And I enjoin him, when his hopes have dwindled to a skeleton, all through false woman's love, to bury the same and this other skeleton in one grave.

"To the world, and those within it whom I have never met, I bequeath my blessing.

"Signed, sealed and declared to be a true disposition of my worldly effects, goods, chattels and possessions. BENJAMIN PLYMOUTH."

Ralston crushed the remarkable document in his hand.

"Well, what is it?" one of the guests asked.

"The letter of a fool or a madman!"

"It does not seem to be pleasant."

"I only wish that the writer was here."

"Are we not to hear it?"

"My friends, I don't think you want to hear it. You have had enough of the horrible, already, and this missive would only add to your creepings of the flesh. Mr. Hodge, with your permission, I will have this box carried to my room, for I have future use for it. When this is done let us forget it—for to-night. As for me, I have use for it in the future, and especial business to transact with the sender!"

CHAPTER V.

AN ENEMY IN AMBUSH.

WYOMING ZEKE finished speaking, folded the "will" and put it carefully away in his pocket. The other guests regarded him inquiringly. They had a good deal of curiosity as to the nature of the paper, but did not attempt to change his decision not to divulge its contents. They had not recovered from the shock of what they had already seen, and, conjecturing that further horrors lurked in the letter, were willing to let it rest.

"Mr. Hodge," continued Zeke, "will you furnish a servant to carry this box to my room?"

"Sartain, sir; sartain."

"I will drive two more nails, to make sure that the—well, let us call it The Demon of the Box—does not jump out and frighten him."

The nails were driven; the servant was called; and the box was soon gone from their presence.

The diplomatic members of the company then went to work to restore tranquillity, and to make the guests forget the cold shivers that were dancing up and down their spinal columns, and were rewarded with a fair measure of success.

There were some of the party who were to take an active part in the scenes about to follow, and may well receive more than passing notice here.

Agnes Hodge, daughter of the Gold Monarch, was a girl universally pronounced charming. She was twenty years of age, of medium height, plump of face and form; and with vivacious manners she united a thoughtful regard for

others, and a gentleness which made her esteemed far more than external attractions. She had been born and reared in the West, and knew little and cared less for fashionable life; but she dressed well, and in good taste, and had the unexceptionable ways of an educated and naturally intelligent woman.

Lorraine Wilberley was two years Agnes's senior. She was tall and somewhat stately, but without any false pride or assumption of superiority. She was regarded as a rarely beautiful woman, and her form might have been envied by a queen. She was a product of the East, and only three weeks had elapsed since her first appearance at Honeysuckle. She and her uncle, Eben Wilberley, an ex-lawyer, were making a tour of the West, and had paused at the mountain town because it, and its people, pleased them.

Childeric Hall, as before stated, was a young man who had been brought to Honeysuckle by Mr. Hodge to instruct the young people. Eliphalet knew what a misfortune the lack of education was, and had established the school at his own expense. Hall was a man of pleasing appearance, honest, worthy, capable, of somewhat grave manners, and, as Hodge had learned, good executive gifts.

Eben Wilberley had made a success as a lawyer, and retained all of his mental strength, but he was no longer free from bodily infirmities, and these had somewhat soured a disposition never too amiable. He was, however, a gentleman, and a well-meaning man.

The effort to restore ease in the evening gathering was fairly successful, and the next hour passed without perceptible discomfort to anyone. Then the guests returned home.

Before they separated, Ralston had asked Childeric Hall to come to his room the next morning, and the schoolmaster presented himself at a reasonably early hour.

He found Zeke smoking a cigar, and leaning back in a comfortable chair with his feet upon the table, while, close to his feet, the mysterious box sat in a conspicuous place.

"Come right in!" the Hotspur easily directed.

"Find a chair, make yourself at home, and speak freely. We are alone, with the exception of The Demon of the Box."

"Have you examined it again?"

"Yes."

"Anything new?"

"Nothing, with the exception of the fact that I am more and more impressed with the ingenuity of the thing. If you ever watched a stationary engine, you must have been struck with wonder to see how marvelously every part worked. So with this concern. From a mere pile of bones it rises, piece by piece, impelled by cunning springs and wires, until it comes into upright form. But that is not the point. Who sent it?"

"Have you no idea?"

"None."

"Have you any enemies?"

"Undoubtedly, but I can think of no one who would be likely to do this. What few I know of are miners, cowboys, and so forth, of the lower, vicious class, whom I have foiled in some lawless scheme. I do not know of any one, though, who needs to feel that he ought to be revenged upon me; and if he did, he would be likely to come forward boldly and make known his grudge in a manly way."

"And the object of the strange present—what is that?"

"You say."

"It does not look to me like a joke."

"Decidedly not."

"Then it must be the act of a madman, or—of one who bears you no good will."

"You put it mildly. 'No good will' means bitter hatred, if anything, and I suspect that I may have innocently stepped upon somebody's corns. The gift did not come from a madman, although a certain taint must have lurked in the mind that conceived it. Now, in what way have I angered any one since I came to Honeysuckle?"

"I have known you intimately since you came, and I say freely that you have done no one wrong."

"Yet, somebody hates me."

"You are sure that the past is not responsible—"

"I am. The tender spot lies with the present."

"Then I give it up."

"Read that!"

Ralston tossed over the document he had found in the box, and Hall read in amazement.

"The writer was insane!" he declared.

"I do not think so. To avoid argument on what looks reasonable, I will say that it is as crazy an epistle as ever a madman penned, but there is, I am sure, method in the madness. Now, let us go over the remarkable 'last will and testament,' as he sees fit to grotesquely term it."

Smoking his cigar with an air of enjoyment, Zeke spread the paper out and ran his eye down the written lines.

"Benjamin Plymouth," he commented. "Evidently an assumed name, and a disgrace to the noble old town on the Atlantic Coast

where our forefathers set their heavy foot. Next, the writer says he was, at the time of writing, near unto death. We will leave that, for now."

"You doubt it, I judge."

"I do. Item one, in this will: He bequeaths to me his 'mistaken faith in human nature.' Useless! I, like every other sensible man, am full to the chin already of lack of confidence in mankind."

"You are cynical."

"That's a different way of alluding to common sense. Now, Benjamin Plymouth plunges into business, and bequeaths to me 'the love of a certain woman,' who, he alleges, I shall be able to identify easily. He adds that 'she has come hundreds of miles,' and that I have looked upon 'her fair, deceitful face.' To whom does that apply?"

"Shall I answer frankly?"

"By all means."

"If it applies to any one, it must be Lorraine Wilberley!"

"Umph! As I have hardly spoken to any other lady, it would seem to apply to her."

"That fortune-teller comes into my mind—"

"She does not fill the bill. She is a late-comer, and I never spoke with her until last night, nor did I ever 'bask in the warm sunshine of her bewildering smile.' Egad! our letter-writer was born a poet; that sentiment should entitle him to high rank in the field of rhyme. But he was not happy, it would seem. Observe the cynicism of one of his latest paragraphs: 'To the world, and to those within it whom I have never met, I bequeath my blessing!' Dear boy! how well he knew the company he had kept; he had had no blessing for them! What is their loss is our gain, and it is about as welcome as the measles—he gives us his 'blessing!'"

"A misfortune, certainly."

"Rather."

"However, there was no good will in it."

"Not an atom. Now, Childeric, what do you make of all this?"

"You have an enemy."

"Unquestionably. Proceed!"

"He has sent this to make you ill at ease, and will follow it up with a more practical attack."

"You forget," returned Zeke, coolly, "that I have him in that box!"

"Have you?"

"Well, I have an outline—a rough sketch of him, as it were. My enemy is not dangerous; he is 'in a box.' You may think this a subject too serious for jesting, but if a man exhibits such outrageously poor taste as to ship his bones around the country by Express, he must take the consequences."

"I remember, Ralston, you said, a moment ago, that you would for the time leave his assertion that, at the time of writing, he was near unto death."

"Well?"

"You doubt the truth of that statement. So do I!"

"You are right; I doubt it a good deal. The guiding spirit of the scheme which led to the sending of this undesirable gift to me still lives. Who he is I cannot say, but he has made his will prematurely, and carried out one item therein with a lack of good faith: he has sent me bones which are not his bones. Now, what will he do next?"

"He may be only a braggart, but it would not surprise me if you heard from him again."

"He will attack me!"

"How?"

"I don't know how, but there is venom and hatred back of all this. The unknown will be heard from again, as you say, and in a more practical way. It may be with knife, or revolver, or with a rifle aimed from a covert."

"Not a pleasant prospect."

"I shall try not to lose any sleep over it—unless I go out to stalk him."

"And I presume, you will not give up Miss Wilberley's acquaintance."

"We have no proof, as yet, that she is the woman alluded to in the will. If she is, she has been grossly wronged, for he was radically severe in referring to the woman he *did* refer to. True, we have known Miss Wilberley only a short time, but I believe her to be an estimable young lady."

"I agree with you fully."

"Thank you. Have you anything to suggest?"

"I don't know that I have."

"Then let us go out. My enemy may be seeking me, and I don't wish to disappoint him."

CHAPTER VI.

A MAN WITH AN AFFLICTION.

RALSTON arose, took down a revolver and examined it carefully. Every chamber was loaded, and he quietly put it away in his pocket. Hall watched in admiration of his companion's coolness. Nobody was any more peaceful than was Zeke when left alone, but he had the nerve to defend himself when any one saw fit to wrong him.

He was familiarly called "The Hotspur," but Hall did not see how it applied. Ralston,

with long, black hair falling in a wave over his neck! his attractive face and perfect form; and his light, airy, careless yet dashing ways, was certainly a man to be noticed by all, but he was not a fire-eater. He quarreled with no one, and molested no one. He never drank to excess, and was guilty of no madcap passions. He rode a horse with dashing grace, but took his gallops on the road outside the town, and never exploited himself in the streets.

He was a good citizen, but one out of the common run.

They left the hotel, for it was there that Zeke boarded, and were about to walk away when they were approached by a man who was a stranger to both.

He had advanced far enough in life to have hair and beard of decided gray, though it would have been hard to estimate his exact age. He was tall, broad-shouldered and of spare flesh, with big hands and powerful limbs, and though he stooped slightly, and carried a staff as long as himself, he did not appear weak. His garments were old and much too large for him, and time, hard wear and other things had left them rusty, threadbare and none too clean. As his hair and beard were untrimmed, and his general appearance that of one who had struck ill luck and not found ambition to lift himself out of "the slough of despond," he looked to be a near relative of a tramp, or that gentleman himself, in the flesh, but he had not advanced far enough in demoralization to be offensive to ordinary minds.

He addressed himself to Zeke and Hall.

"I beg yer pardon, gentlemen, but can I have a word with ye on a subject of importance?" he asked, in a husky, confidential whisper.

"Go on, but don't take too much time," Zeke answered.

"You haven't got a dime? Excuse me, sir, but I did not ask fur money," was the dignified rejoinder.

"I said that we were in a hurry."

"There ain't no cause fur worry? Thank you, sir; thank you. I will now explain—"

"What's the matter with your ears?" demanded the Hotspur, raising his voice.

"Have pity on your tears? Excuse me; I did not know that you was in trouble."

"Can't you hear?" shouted the young man.

"Do I like *beer*? Sir, I never drink!" asserted the stranger, with an air of virtuous, but mild indignation.

Hall was laughing, but Zeke advanced close to the old man and loudly shouted:

"I say, who are you?"

This time he was more successful, and a pleased smile overspread the other's bronzed face.

"Me? Oh! I'm Old Eli Drake, sometimes called Deef Drake, because they say I can't hear very well. Well, my ears *ain't* what they was thirty year ago, but *deef!*—bless you, no, sir! I kin hear as well as the average, though there *is* an impediment som'ers 'round the drum ter my auricular organs. I'm a *bit* hard o' hearin'—jest an artom. I'm gittin' old, but I ain't infirm."

"You're all right yet."

"I ought ter wear a night-cap? Well, I do; a red flannel one, that I made with my own hands. I couldn't do without it, an' I find it a useful thing."

"Deaf as a post!" groaned Ralston. "Will you try your luck, Hall?"

He had naturally lowered his voice a good deal, but Deaf Drake thought that he heard.

"Oh! no, sir," he protested, huskily, "I couldn't think of going to an asylum. I make my own way, an' I do it in honest trade. I want, gents, ter call your attention to a prime article I am sellin' fur home use. I interdoce myself as the sole American agent fur the celebrated Royal Egyptian Ointment, a preparation which is without a rival in the treatment o' all bruises, burns, boils, chilblains, croup, sprains, earache, bites o' insects, neuralgia—"

"We'll take your word for it. No doubt it's very nice," agreed Hall.

"What's the price? Only a dollar a bottle, or six fur five. Six fur five, an' as cheap as dirt! It was manufactured by an Egyptian prince, an' was used in the family fur goin' on seven hundred years. As an ointment it has no equal, an' only a few superiors. My gran'father's cousin bought the secret o' an Egyptian prince, an' now it is knowed only ter the Drake family. It will cure all bruises, burns, boils—"

In his husky, confidential way he seemed as tireless as he was voluble, and Zeke hurriedly drew out a dollar, an example followed by Hall. The old man had produced a greasy, ill-looking, small-sized bottle, but neither aspired to become its possessor.

"Here you are, uncle!" shouted the Hotspur. "Take this money, and keep the ointment. Probably it will do us just as much good, and, just at present, we need no salves. We wish you good luck."

"How do I make the truck? That, sir, is somethin' I cannot reveal," answered Mr. Drake, shaking his head gravely.

He was holding out two bottles in return for the money, but Ralston waved them back.

"Give them to some tramp!" he shouted.

"Yes, sir; they *are* good fur the cramp. Ef you are 'flicted that way you can't git no better cure—"

Once more Zeke got close to the old man's ear, and shouted loudly:

"I say, where did you come from, and how long are you going to stop with us? We are all pretty weak of lungs here, and your presence will be a severe tax upon us if long continued. We might possibly pay you to move on to Cottoncliff."

"Me? Oh! I'm Old Eli Drake, sometimes im-politely called Deef Drake. I s'pose I've traveled over more ground sellin' my Royal Egyptian Ointment than any other man ever traveled, an' them who hev bad burns, bruises an' boils hev had cause ter bless the name o' Drake. I'm pretty well preserved fur a man o' my years, my only infirmity being a slight deafness o' my left ear. This was caused by my usin' too much water when I took a bath, once, but I shall outgrow it. Old as I be, I'm as muskeler as when I's young."

"I'm ready to believe that."

"I'm a sly old rat? Well, well, boys," confessed Eli, his mild gray eyes twinkling, "I ain't fell inter my dotage yet. I do sort o' like ter go out with the boys, now an' then, an' hev a little jamboree, an' make bold ter say I can hold up my end with 'em. But, deary me, I ain't what I was once! Why, when I's young, half the gals was jest a-dyin' fur me with broken hearts. I don't want ter brag, but, at one time, seven on 'em was actually courtin' me at onc't!"

Still retaining his husky whisper and his confidential air, and blinking like a sage old owl, Drake bobbed his head up and down in short, slow nods to emphasize his remarks.

"We've struck a character," remarked Hall.

"A very disreputable one."

"He looks harmless."

"That's the most dangerous kind of folks."

"Perhaps this is the man who sent you The Demon of the Box."

"If so, the marvelous working of its joints may be due to his ointment. I think he said it was good for the bones. Well, Drake, we shall have to be off!"

"No; it ain't good fur a cough, but it will cure a sore throat, an' ease up the brunkel tubes. The Egyptians used it fur all— Well, well, ef they ain't gone!"

Sure enough, the young men, despairing of making themselves heard, were hurrying away. Deaf Drake looked after them thoughtfully, and added:

"Possibly, I didn't understand what he said last. Sometimes I think my hearin' ain't so *ain't* so good as it was once. I know he said somethin' about a cough, though. I'm sorry I didn't ketch it, an' hope they don't feel hurt!"

Deep trouble was pictured upon his face, and he remained for some time in deep thought. Not until they had turned a corner and passed from his view did he turn and go on his way.

"I'll see 'em again afore I leave town," he observed. "They wouldn't take none o' the ointment, an' won't hev no chance ter see its merits, but I presume they will git shot afore long, an' then I'll drop around an' a'ply some ter their wounds."

Unconscious of his Samaritan intentions the young men continued to walk on, but another encounter was in store for them. A stout, loose-jointed fellow who possessed all of Deaf Drake's dilapidated exterior, without any of his redeeming traits, made his appearance and, sauntering up to them, showed a very dirty face and a picturesque collection of rags.

"Be'n lookin' fur ye!" he announced, in a jerky way, as he nodded to Ralston.

"For me?"

"Fur nobody else."

"I am honored," Zeke commented, sarcastically. "Well, having found me, what next?"

"You're wanted."

"By whom?"

"Dunno—he's over there."

The speaker jerked his thumb toward the pine wood outside the town, as though he were jabbing with a sword at an enemy.

He was known by sight to Childeric Hall, and possessed the name of Perk Tuttle. He was a vagabond who was usually too heavy with liquor to be dangerous, although he did not impress the beholder with the idea that he was any too good for the temporal world.

Ralston was not favorably impressed with him, or inclined to obey the call, but patient questioning drew from him the statement that he had met a man over in the pine wood who had asked him to carry a message to Wyoming Zeke. It was to the effect that the Hotspur had a friend waiting there, who would be glad to see him at his earliest convenience.

The information did not create any great amount of delightful expectation in Zeke's mind.

"Didn't he give his name?"

"Nary name."

"Did you ever see him before?"

"No."

"Was he alone?"

"Yes."

"All right, Mercury; you can toddle on your way."

"Powerful dry, I be, boss!" observed Perk.

"The best advice I can give is that you go and soak yourself in the creek. It would do away with your dryness, and keep you from falling to pieces like a shrunken beer-barrel. However, it might also start some of the dirt which, I infer, you carry around as a specimen of your home plantation, where you played when a boy, and I won't urge the point. Here is a coin—go and attend to your dryness. I presume you can find a cure at any saloon."

"Boss, I see you've been in the same way yourself. Take a poor mar's blessin', an' I'll take your coin."

He had it already, so he made a bow which had a tinge of irony and shambled away. Zeke looked after him in a speculative frame of mind.

"I smell smoke!" he announced, tersely. "I never yet had a *friend* who was ashamed to show his head in public like an honest man. The fellow who wants to see me in the woods is open to suspicion, but I am going to see him, just the same. There may be bullets flying over there—will you go along?"

Not having any particular fear of bullets, Hall went. They found the alleged friend without trouble, but he proved to be an entire stranger. More than that, he was a rakish-looking person, who would never have been taken for a clergyman.

"I'm glad you've come," he announced, "for I have business of importance."

"Go right on!" Zeke directed.

"It is private. Let your companion go a hundred feet away, and I'll come right to the point."

A motion gave Hall his cue, and he went to a safe distance.

"Now drive on!" Ralston added.

"Have you lately received the gift of a box?"

"Well, rather," the Hotspur admitted, growing interested.

"I am here to speak about that box and contents!"

CHAPTER VII.

THE GOLD MONARCH RECEIVES A PROPOSITION.

ELIPHALET HODGE was seated in his private room at his own house. The entertainment of the previous evening was a thing of the past, and he was glad that it was so. No one had a kinder feeling toward mankind than he, and his friendship was of a warm, sincere kind, but when it came to meeting both sexes of an evening in that way—he would much rather be excused.

Society and he did not agree—never had and never could.

He did not like to wear good clothes himself, or see others wear them, and when that was the condition of things, he felt awkward and ill at ease.

His hands and feet were always in the way; he moved clumsily, and knowing it, knew that others must see it.

He was not particularly diffident, or afraid of the opposite sex, and when they came to him in old, or coarse garments, he was wholly at ease, but good clothes were the bane of his life. He hated them, no matter who wore them; they made him feel worried and unhappy; and he would gladly have banished them from Honeysuckle.

He had a daughter, however, and realized that he owed her something. Her present and her future were everything to him, and, for her sake, he gave receptions occasionally, and attended others, though it was a terrible ordeal to him.

The man was one of strong individuality and many peculiarities, and his history as a seeker for earth-hidden gold was interesting.

Before he came to Honeysuckle he had swung the pick with his own hands many years, and without success.

Season after season he plodded along, getting just enough out of his labor to live, and having the reputation of being an "unlucky" miner. When he first saw the site of Honeysuckle, not a hut stood there, and probably not a pick had ever turned the soil. He prospected, found promising indications, wielded his lonely pick, and "struck it rich."

That was twelve years before the date of this story.

Having struck his bonanza, he soon proved that he had good business gifts. Acting wisely, he had, in every sense, been the founder of the town. Before he made known his discovery he had gathered enough precious ore to be able to command the situation, and he remained the central figure in the town that grew, slowly and steadily, where he planted it. Others did well, but he, having recognized and retained the richest ground, grew rich.

His mine paid very well, indeed, and as he was wise, generous, simple-hearted and free from ostentation, his neighbors were glad to give him a clear road as the "great man" of the place.

He did not seek the position; it came to him naturally. His only ambition was to boom Honeysuckle, and he did it well.

Realizing his prudence and judgment, Honey-

suckle stood at his back, a solid delegation, ever ready to uphold him.

But wealth, nor riches, nor power, nor fame could change the man. Poorly educated, nearly all his life poor in pocket, as simple in his nature as a child, he would never be anything else than what he was.

He it was who named the town. To some of the miners "Honeysuckle" sounded like a foolish word, but they did not demur; his will was their law. To him, it was a tribute to the peace and rest he had found there. The woods, the hills, the mountains, the many nooks within them—all were dear to the plain, simple old man. If the place had been given a rough, riotous name, he would have been grieved, just the same as he would had any one trod real "honeysuckles" under foot.

There was still another phase to his character. When he was not working for the town's interests, he was humble to the extreme. One keen observer had said of him that "his whole life was an apology for the presumption of living." If he encountered a worthy vagabond, or a homeless dog, and thought that he had wronged either, he would apologize to the one and find good quarters for the other.

Although humble, he was never abject. The dignity of unblemished honor was his, and it never forsook him. It was simply a case of real, unostentatious philanthropy and good will to men. The philanthropist of the more civilized world was always careful to have his benevolence paraded in the daily newspaper by an obsequious, cringing reporter; Eliphalet Hodge tried to hide his good deeds, and was ill at ease if they were referred to.

In course of time the *sobriquet* of "Old Humility" was attached to him, and, once applied, it adhered well. If there was a trace of uncomplimentary pity about it, it was, nevertheless, used by men who were ready to do and die for him, and of this class were nearly all the men of Honeysuckle.

Sitting in his room on the morning before mentioned, there was a cloud upon Old Humility's face which was not usually visible. He looked weary, too, as though he had passed a bad night. Such was the fact; he had slept but little.

All through the night his mind had been busy, and his thoughts concentrated on one subject. Madame Mystery, *alias* Spitfire Nell, had literally thrown a bomb into his camp when she read the past for him the previous night.

If any of his Honeysuckle friends had heard her words, they would have laughed at the theory that he could have any interest in the case, real or imaginary, of the murderer and convict of whom Nell had spoken so glibly.

Yet, that very circumstance had given Old Humility a sleepless night, and left him worn and weary in the morning.

Somehow, he appeared to feel a deep interest in the wretched convict, but it gave him no pleasure. If his friends had seen him then, they would have wondered what had driven all the sunshine out of his face.

His moody meditations were finally interrupted by the arrival of a visitor, and Mr. Cole Boylston made his appearance. Madame Mystery's friend bore himself politely, but under this thin mask was the air of one who feels confident of his position.

"Hope I don't intrude," he said.

"Not at all," Mr. Hodge replied.

"My name is Boylston."

"I don't remember seein' you afore."

"I don't live at Honeysuckle."

"From the East?"

"Not recently. I am last from Cottoncliff!"

A shadow passed over the Gold Monarch's face. For some time Cottoncliff had been to him like a thorn in the flesh. The country around Honeysuckle was growing; the population was increasing in all the towns and camps; the necessity of having a regularly-organized government was appreciated; and the word had gone forth that a new county, and a county-seat, were to be.

From the first there had been but two candidates for the honor of the aforesaid county-seat. Had it not been for Cottoncliff, Honeysuckle would have had a clear track.

As it was, the word "Cottoncliff" was to the average inhabitant of Honeysuckle like a red flag to a bull, and Eliphalet Hodge, if not boisterous, was much vexed by the claims of the rival town.

He looked suspiciously at Cole Boylston as he heard the last statement.

"From Cottoncliff, hey?"

"Yes."

"Left because ye didn't like, I reckon."

"On the contrary, I like very well."

"Humph!"

"I have become a citizen of that delightful town, and am now here as an agent for the inhabitants thereof."

Eliphalet showed prompt interest.

"Ah!"

"Yes; it's about the county-seat."

"What about it?"

"You did not meet the commission that assembled to hear the claims of the rival towns."

"I sent agents."

"And the commissioners very properly refused to listen to them."

"Properly! How so?"

"You were the man who made the claim for Honeysuckle; you own half of the town, and represent at least half the wealth; and you had promised to build the county-house free of charge. Naturally, you were the man they wanted to see."

Hodge could do business as promptly as any one, and he was aroused by this time.

"My agents had authority ter speak fur me, an' they said as much."

"You have seen that the idea did not go."

"I don't see why it was refused."

"Simply because the commissioners were there for business, and would hear to no one but you."

"Wal, let it pass," Old Humility said, with an air of vexation.

"Have you given up your claim?"

"Given it up? Sartainly not!"

"And you still want the county-seat here?"

"Yes."

"It is wanted at Cottoncliff!"

"I know it."

"Well, Cottoncliff has sent me to make a compromise."

"I'm afeerd you've had yer journey fur nothin'."

"Cottoncliff is willing to do the right thing, as you shall see. Listen! First of all, if you consent to let the county-seat go to our town, we will have the railroad, about which there is now so much talk, follow the Powderhorn Valley and pass through Honeysuckle before it goes to Cottoncliff, thereby giving your camp a splendid chance to grow."

Boylston spoke very persuasively, but it was not to be seen that he impressed Eliphalet very much.

"You're ginerous!" the Gold Monarch observed, with as near an approach to sarcasm as he was capable of.

"But that isn't all!"

"Ain't it?"

"Not by any means. Cottoncliff will consent to disburse the sum of ten thousand dollars, to be applied to such use as you shall say, right here in your town."

Hodge smiled in amusement.

"Do your folks think we're bankrupt here?" he asked quietly.

"Certainly not. We know you are very wealthy, sir—the wealthiest man within fifty miles."

"Then what is ten thousand dollars ter me?"

"Is it to be despised?"

"Yes! When offered as a bribe, it is ter be despised!" declared the Gold Monarch firmly.

"But the railroad—"

"May come ter Honeysuckle, anyhow."

"Seriously, do you mean to persist in claiming the county-seat?"

"Great land! of course I do! What did I put in my claim fur, ef not ter get what I asked for?"

"Then why didn't you meet the commissioners?"

"Didn't I send my agent?"

Boylston's persistence had caused Hodge to answer somewhat curtly, but the visitor was not to be discomposed.

"We took your course to be evidence that you were growing indifferent."

"You made a mistake."

"The commissioners vow that they will hear only you, and ignore your agents."

"Do they?"

"Yes; and if you don't appear in person, they will throw your claim over."

"Will they? We'll see."

"Mr. Hodge, listen to reason! Give Cottoncliff a show. Let us have the county-seat, and anything that we can do for Honeysuckle shall be done cheerfully."

"Ef the county-seat is lost, Honeysuckle will not amount ter any more nor a dead dog. All that kin be done fur a dead dog is ter bury him. Honeysuckle ain't ready ter be buried yet!"

"Do you refuse my request and offer?"

"I do that, most decided!" Eliphalet declared, with emphasis.

"Then, sir, I must put in my documentary evidence. Be so good as to read that!"

And Boylston tossed a folded paper into the Gold Monarch's lap.

CHAPTER VIII.

THE GOLD MONARCH'S DANGER.

OLD HUMILITY did not at once touch the paper, but sat looking at it suspiciously.

He had no idea what it contained, but did have a presentiment that it was nothing good. As Cole Boylston had argued Cottoncliff's case at length, there would be no necessity for putting it in writing unless to explain a more extreme point.

"That is for you to read," observed Boylston, after waiting in vain for Hodge to move.

"What's it about?"

"You can tell by looking."

"It is useless fur Cottoncliff ter foller the p'int up further."

"Ain't you willing to give the town a show?"

"It don't rest with me. Sartainly, I bear Cottoncliff no ill will, but she must manage her own affairs. I wish her well, but Honeysuckle will hold out fur the county-seat."

"Will you read the paper?"

"Yes."

The Gold Monarch answered reluctantly, and took up the document. His education was not of the best, but he could read well enough to get the sense of a written article as readily as the average person.

He unfolded the paper, looked at the first line, and then seemed to grow surprised.

"What's this?" he asked.

"What is what?"

"This starts off with the head-line—'A Fable!'"

"What of it? Fables make good reading. The wisest of men liked to peruse them in old times; the best of men *tell* them, at the present day."

Old Humility shook his head, but turned to the paper, which was in writing in a bold, and, judging by appearances, masculine type. This is what he read:

"A FABLE."

"Once upon a time there lived a big, clumsy, awkward, overgrown dog; a shaggy, massive fellow such as people instinctively think well of. This particular dog was considered to have good habits. His bark was not worse than his bite, for he seldom barked. Teams might come and teams might go, but he would never tear out into the street and make nature turn pale with his racket."

"A barking dog is a nuisance; one that does not bark, needlessly, is honored among all men."

"Hence, this particular dog was named Tray, and the name seemed to fit like the paper on the wall, he was so honest. Honest men and honest dogs seldom get credit for being really bright, and our big, awkward, shambling Tray was not considered good for much."

"Men thought him stupid. Really, the most stupid creature was he who thought Tray lacking in ability to do evil."

"One day Tray saw a new dog-house being made in an adjoining yard. It was neat and cozy, and Tray coveted it. What a splendid place for a dog to live! Perhaps it was for him; he certainly hoped so. But he had a shock when it was done; another dog, handsomer and more intelligent, was installed in the kennel."

"How Tray hated him!—hated him as only a low, evil mind can. He determined to have revenge. He could not bear to have another more fortunate than himself."

One night, when the other dog lay outside his kennel, Tray crept upon him, seized him by the throat, strangled him! He had thought to lay the blame to a wolf, or to a tiger, but he was detected, and stoned out of the village. He fled fast and far. The blood of his kind was upon him; he was hunted, accursed, terrified."

"He went far away, and began life anew. As before, men thought well of him. Not knowing his history, they pronounced him 'honest,' as had been done before. He was a shrewd dog, and he grew in the world. He found more bones than other dogs, and always had enough to gnaw."

"Such a dog is beloved of all dogs, and Tray waxed mighty. No one else was too grand to refuse to do him honor. The big, clumsy brute was a big toad in the puddle."

"What was the result? He swelled with pride. He coveted all things. He wanted the earth. He spread out his fat body and schemed to get all that he looked upon."

"But his position was not secure. Blood was on his fat paws; blood cried for vengeance. There was a cyclone breathing around him. Would it rise to fury and crush him?"

"Time, only, could tell."

"Moral: Sinners' feet stand on slippery places. Old dog Tray must not forget the past, or the past will not ignore him. He must not claim too much, or he will get more than he claims. In brief, Tray ought not to covet the whole earth until he is sure that his *past* will not rise up against him. *Murder* is an ugly word!"

Thus ended the record.

While Mr. Hodge had been reading, Boylston had watched him closely. The visitor knew no more than was contained in the paper, and was anxious to verify its vague hints. So he studied the Gold Monarch's face, and tried to decide if the so-called "fable" had any foundation.

He found it hard to believe that Eliphalet Hodge had ever committed any crime.

But there was confirmation of the insinuation in the old man's manner. He betrayed dismay too plainly to leave a doubt that there was something in it.

When he finally looked up and met Boylston's gaze his face grew pale.

"What do you think of it?" his companion asked.

Eliphalet was slow in making his reply, but a strong effort enabled him to answer with a certain degree of composure.

"Who in the world has spent valuable time in writin' sech stuff as this?" he asked.

"One who knows 'Tray.'"

"Who was it?"

"So you consider the paper important?"

"Sartainly not; it is very foolish."

"Then why do you want to know who wrote it?"

"Because I pity sech a weak-minded critter!"

"Don't you believe in fables?"

"No."

"Suppose they are founded on fact?"

"What's silly, is silly."

"But you seem flustered by what you read."

"I?"

"Yes."

"Nonsense! Nonsense, young man! I ain't used ter sech stuff as this, not bein' a literary man; but it seems ter me about as weak an' idiotic as anything kin be. I ain't much knowin' ter stories, though I am told that some like 'em right wal, but I don't think anybody could feel any likin' fur this stuff!"

"Do you see any double meaning?"

"Any what?"

"Don't you see that the story of a man is told there, in disguise?"

"No."

Old Humility was bearing himself well, all things considered, and his voice was much firmer than was to be expected, but he was not his old frank, honest self. His gaze avoided that of his companion, and deep perturbation was perceptible.

Boylston smiled; he had been afraid that he was being deceived, but the fear existed no longer.

"We may as well abandon the field of fable," he announced, boldly. "You and I both know that it is the story of a man that is told there. I am not a person to deal with nonsensical things, but a man of business, first, last and always. This alleged fable is the story of man, and we rely upon it to bring the county-seat to Cottoncliff!"

The declaration was out at last, and Eliphalet's big hands trembled perceptibly, but his voice did not show corresponding emotion.

"What is this ter me?" he asked.

"You ought to know."

"I don't."

"Don't you see anything familiar in the fable?"

"No."

"Do you want it made plainer?"

"Yes."

Boylston was staggered. The Gold Monarch no longer avoided his gaze, and, it seemed, defied a revelation. Then Boylston remembered the host's reputation, and it did not seem possible that he could be a criminal. Boylston was silent.

"Did you write this?" Hodge added.

"No."

"Who did?"

"I can't tell you that."

"You say that a certain man is aimed at. Who is that man?"

Boylston was silent. He moved uneasily in his chair, unable to explain. He had come with doubts in his mind, and, though they had momentarily been dispelled, they were back in full force. He dared not make any charge against the Gold Monarch. He could not prove anything, and knew that it was dangerous to make assertions against the character of a rich man.

"Just at present I am not ready to state," he replied.

"Do you know the partic'lars o' what is hinted at here?" continued Eliphalet.

"No."

"Who does?"

"The one who wrote it."

"Who was that?"

"I can't tell."

Old Humility leaned back in his chair and regarded his companion steadily. As the one lost confidence, the other regained it. There was so obviously a weak point in Boylston's armor that Hodge outdid himself. Unusually very mild in his ways, his manner was stern as he added:

"You do not need ter tell. I know whar you passed last night, an' the comp'ny you was in. It wa'n't the sort o' comp'ny, I make bold ter say, that the men o' Cottoncliff would like their agent ter keep. You stayed at the house of a woman who sees fit ter call herself Madame Mystery. This person is under the notice of our folks, an' liable ter be asked ter move on soon. We know nothin' ag'in' her; we don't suspect any good of her. She an' her friends can't come an' go in Honeysuckle unless they behave themselves!"

"What have you against her?"

"Nothin', as long as she minds her own business; but her prosperity o' Honeysuckle is not goin' ter pave the way fur frauds, knaves an' sharpers ter come hyar an' feed on our people!"

The speaker was gaining strength every moment, and Cole Boylston grew depressed. It was Spitfire Nell who had given him the "Fable," and she had assured him that it would prove potent, but he was afraid to press the point. He knew the woman of old, and, also, knew that she was capable of any trick.

Just then he forgot how Hodge had been affected by the paper, and was afraid that Nell was playing him false.

"You can go back ter Cottoncliff," added Hodge, making a movement to imply that the interview was at an end, "an' tell 'em that the matter o' the county-seat will be settled in the reg'lar way. Honeysuckle won't withdraw."

Boylston mechanically rose.

"I'm sorry that you reject peaceful measures."

"Do your folks intend ter use other measures?"

"Time will show."

"Is that a threat?"

"Certainly not," was the hasty reply.

"I b'lieve we are as strong in all ways as Cottoncliff."

"You are stronger, in numbers."

"Then," remarked the Gold Monarch, in a suggestive manner, "Cottoncliff had better confine her work ter 'peaceful measures.' It'll go hard with them that defy the law."

CHAPTER IX.

A NAME WHICH CARRIES DISMAY.

COLE BOYLSTON had found his hat and prepared to go when a knock sounded at the door. "Come in!" directed the Gold Monarch.

The door opened, and Agnes Hodge and Lorraine Wilberley made their appearance. Boylston's face flushed.

"Excuse me, father," said Agnes; "I supposed that you were alone."

"I shall be, pooty soon."

"Yes, I—I am just going," added Boylston; who then twirled his hat uneasily and added: "I think I have met you before, Miss Hodge!"

The young lady favored him with a glance, but it had no trace of recognition.

"We meet a good many persons who are soon forgotten," she returned, coldly.

"You went to ride once, and met with an accident," prompted the visitor.

"Such things are common."

"A wheel came off from your carriage," persisted Cole, "and, the nut being lost, you were brought to a standstill in the road until a gentleman appeared and aided you by finding the last nut."

"True; and I afterward learned that he, himself, was the one who removed it!"

Boylston started, and then stood like one dumfounded.

"At the time," pursued Agnes, "I really thought that the gentleman had done me a service, but when I learned that he had been seen to remove the nut from the axle, while I was in the store, and put the abstracted article in his pocket, I understood how he happened to be near at the crisis, and why he had such good luck in finding it, afterward!"

"But, Miss Hodge," hurriedly responded the flushed visitor, "some one spoke with infamous disregard of truth. It was a lie! I hope you did not believe it."

"I could not do otherwise; my informant was not to be doubted."

"Miss Hodge, I was that gentleman!" declared Boylston, drawing himself more erect.

"I know it."

"And I brand as false the account given you!"

Agnes bowed coldly.

"Is that my answer?" he added.

"We need not dispute."

"Is it thus that you reward one who has done you a service?"

"For reasons best known to you, sir, you planned the service which you did me. You knew, after you had tampered with the wheel, that it would come off, and were on hand to give your aid. I thanked you then; I need not repeat it."

The young lady turned her back upon him. His face flushed to a purplish red indicative of appologetic tendencies. He felt her manifest disdain keenly.

There was a brief silence, which Boylston, at least, found awkward, and then Agnes addressed the Gold Monarch.

"Father, I would like to talk with you on business."

"You shall, as soon's we're alone."

"I see that I am not wanted here," remarked Boylston, stiffly, "and I will no longer contaminate you with my presence. I would have been a friend to you all, but you have set the pace for the trot. I may be somewhere around when you pass under the wire, and the time may come when my friendship will not seem a thing to be despised. Miss Hodge"—here his surly manner grew somewhat pathetic—"you have done me injustice, and, as you have the reputation of being a worthy and amiable young lady, I think your conscience will yet trouble you. Good-day!"

He bowed, and beat a retreat without a word being said to stay him. It was a peculiar and rather threatening farewell, and the memory of it haunted them for some time to come.

Just then they were not in a diplomatic mood, and did nothing to appease him.

Mr. Hodge was looking at his daughter wonderingly.

"I did not know you'd ever met that man," he observed.

"It was only a passing event," Agnes answered. "I had been out driving one day, and, on my way back, a wheel came off. Boylston promptly appeared, volunteered to go back and find the missing part, did so, and helped me on my way again. He made an undisguised effort to make this the stepping-stone to an acquaintance, but I did not like his appearance, and was rather cool. Later, I learned from a friend that he had been around the carriage while I was in the store, and she saw him put something in his pocket. She did not suspect the truth then, but future events showed very clearly that he removed the nut from the end of the

axle on purpose to have the wheel come off and give him a chance to be of service. Not a very romantic way of making my acquaintance."

"Are you sure he did it?"

"Isn't the proof strong?"

"Yes; but did your friend see him hev the nut?"

"No. But how else could it lose off? And why was he meddling with my carriage?"

Old Humility did not regard the proof as complete, but he did not argue the point.

"In any case," he answered, "I think you do wal ter avoid the man; I don't think him the sort o' man you nor me kin admire. Did you say you had business with me?"

"Yes. There is a letter from the county-seat commissioners."

"Ah!"

"It is not very favorable, and I thought you would want to hear it at once."

"Sartain—of course. Set down. Hev a seat, Miss Wilberley. You know, I s'pose, that Agnes is my clerk?"

"So I am told," replied Lorraine, with a smile.

"A good one, too; a right good one. She kin write letters that Benjamin Franklin would be proud on, but I kin use a pick far better. Read on, little woman."

"The letter is written from Huguenot Flat, and is as follows:

"MR. ELIPHALET HODGE:—

"DEAR SIR:—We write this to say that we shall again meet to consider the question of the county-seat on the twenty-fifth instant, other duties preventing speedier attention to the matter. On that date the matter will be decided. We deem it best to inform you th t we cannot consent to deal with any agents. We refused to hear yours at our last meeting, and shall refuse again if they appear. This matter is too important for us to deal with subordinates. You represent the money of Honeysuckle, and, without you, Honeysuckle amounts to nothing. Cottoncliff has put in a strong claim through the very men who met us. They represented the money of their town. Unless we can see you in person we infer that the county-seat will go where the weight of evidence now seems to belong—to the town of Cottoncliff. If this opinion is reversed, it will be done by you in person.

"By the commissioners.

"AMAROSE FADLEY,
ROGER L. PRAY,
J. Q. A. MEADE."

Agnes quickly folded the paper and sat waiting for her father to speak. This he did not do, but sat looking at vacancy in an absent way. The troubled expression had come back to his face.

"I think you will have to meet them, father," remarked Agnes, at last.

"Why do they insist on't?" asked the Gold Monarch, in an aggrieved way.

"Perhaps it would be better for you."

"I don't think so."

"You have ample time."

"I don't see why these men are so set on seein' me!" Eliphalet irritably replied. "Ain't my word good enough when sent by an agent?"

"They do seem unnecessarily stubborn."

Agnes answered in a way to please her father, but she was regarding him curiously. From the first his conduct had been peculiar in the matter.

He was not a great talker, but, when the idea was first mentioned, his townsmen wanted him to meet the commissioners personally, and urge their claims. He had resisted all requests and refused to go. Then came the direct invitation from the commissioners, and again he refused.

Why was it?

It certainly looked as though he was afraid, but why should he be? Queer and awkward as he was, he had never shown real diffidence before. True, he had often refused to see travelers; had even snubbed some of them; and it was well known that the humble people of Honeysuckle occupied his regard to the exclusion of the aforesaid travelers; but this had always been explained by his aversion to folks who were rich, fashionably clad and aristocratic.

Why he should be afraid to meet the commissioners Agnes could not see.

He sat gazing gloomily away from her for some time, and then suddenly looked up.

"Did ye read all?" he asked.

"Yes. No; here is one line, but it is of no importance. Following the names of the commissioners is the brief legend, 'By Norris Dayton, clerk.'"

"By whom?"

The question came sharply from Lorraine Wilberley, and so surprised Agnes that she was not able to reply.

"What is the name?" Lorraine added.

"Norris Dayton."

"Here!"

"Not here, but in the Territory, it would seem."

Agnes answered wonderingly, looking closely at her companion. Lorraine, tall and queenly, was a woman of the world to the extent of having that enviable composure which comes of much contact with mankind, and Agnes had thought that while she had her share of human feeling, she was perfectly capable of hiding the fact.

But Lorraine had betrayed emotion, deep and decided, and her fair face was the picture of dismay as Agnes studied it.

"Do you know him, Lorraine?" added the younger girl.

"I do—too well!"

"If he is not a friend, I think you need not give him a thought. He is not likely to come to Honeysuckle."

"Be that as it may, I shall leave here!"

"Leave Honeysuckle?"

"Yes."

"Why?"

Lorraine did not at once answer. She stood close to the window, and, in a manifest attempt to recover calmness, she turned and looked out. Scarcely had she done so, however, before she started back.

"Great heavens!" she cried, "Norris Dayton is coming here!"

CHAPTER X.

DEAF DRAKE IS PARTY TO A BARGAIN.

MADAME MYSTERY was seated in her room awaiting Cole Boylston's return when there was a knock at the door. She thought it was that of Cerberus, her doorkeeper, and did not hesitate to answer. Without turning her head she said, "Come in!" and the order was obeyed by some one.

"Well, what is it?" she asked.

There was no reply, but a shuffling sound, instead, and she finally deigned to look. What she saw brought her to her feet at once. A man who was ragged, unshorn and dirty stood there—in brief, Deaf Drake.

His face was new to her, and, thinking that a mere tramp had appeared, her anger rose. Cerberus had allowed him to pass, and Cerberus should have a lesson he would not soon forget. She took one step toward the door to summon her servant and have the intruder ejected, but the bland smile which overspread Deaf Drake's face made her pause.

There did not appear to be any harm in him.

"Well, what's wanted?" she asked.

"Be you the fortune-teller?" Drake asked.

"I am. What of it?"

"Hey?"

"What do you seek?"

"You ain't workin' this week?" repeated the intruder, with his usual facility for hearing things wrong. "Wal, you are lucky; I hev ter work all the time."

"I don't care whether you do or not. What do you want here?"

"I seem ter be o' good cheer? Wal, I be; what's the use o' bein' cast down? I ain't got no wife ter pester me, an' nobody ter make afraid. My name is Eli Drake, but some calls me Deaf Drake, 'cause they hev an idee that my hearin' ain't o' the best. That's wrong! I ain't deaf, but thar is a fractur' o' the drum o' the left ear, caused by my marm thumpin' it so much when I's young. She'd rather beat out 'The Old Oak-bucket' on my ear-drum than ter play 'The Song o' the Shirt' on the wash-tub."

"You're nobody's fool, I see," remarked Nell, eying him curiously.

"Yes, yes; I am in mercantile business. I'm the sole American agent fur the Royal Egyptian Ointment, an universal specific fur burns, bruises, boils an' bunions. Sold at one dollar a bottle, or six fur five. Six fur five, an' cheap as dirt. Want ter buy?"

"Not to-day."

"Will it take freckles away? Yes, it will; an' fur the toilet thar is no more superior article. It's good for burns, bruises—"

Spitfire Nell astonished the venerable peddler by walking up and seizing one of his ears in a firm hold.

"Dry up!" she cried, loudly.

"No; it won't dry up. It is absorbed inter the pores—"

"You are the one I want to dry up, and don't you forget it. Stop your chattering! Hear?"

"Yes, yes; I hear very wal. Always was quick ter ketch flyin' words, 'specially when spoke by a charmin' female. Hev great consid'ration fur the sex!"

Eli crouched under her hold much like a schoolboy who fears chastisement, but she certainly had found the way to make him hear.

"No more talk about your ointment," she sternly added. "Understand?"

"Yes, yes; though I'd like ter swap it fur a prognosticated fortune. It can't be beat fur burns, bruises, boils an' bunions, an' the price is only one dollar—six fur five."

"Keep your goods, you quack."

"Will it turn the skin black? No; not in the least—Yow!"

Eli wound up with a husky cry as she peremptorily led him to a chair and thrust him into it.

"Sit there. I want to talk with you."

"Always did like a charmin' female—"

"Who are you?"

"My name is Eli Drake, though some calls me Deaf Drake—"

"Where did you come from?"

Spitfire Nell had her mouth close to his ear, and was more successful than the average in making him understand.

"Don't come from nowhar. I'm always on the go, an' never on the come."

"You look like a knave."

"I ain't. My mother's cousin was a Sunday-school teacher, an' I've inherited all his virtues."

"Nonsense! You are a knave, and I know it. I can tell a rascal the moment I see one."

"Ef you approve on't, I be a knave," cheerfully agreed Mr. Drake.

"I understand you, old man. You are too lazy to work, and are playing the tramp on a scale to fit your inclinations. Your alleged ointment, like yourself, is a humbug. You don't expect any one to use it, but rely upon your condition to fill up your pocket. A sight of you is suggestive of small-pox, and, rather than breathe the same air you do, the average person will invest in your pork-grease simply to get rid of you. Haven't I diagnosed the case correctly, you disreputable tramp and unconscionable knave?"

"Hear! hear!" uttered Eli, clapping his hands. "How you remind me o' Cicero! I never expected fer ter hear sech eloquence ag'in. I knowed Cicero wal, an' him an' me had some rare old times, but I thought eloquence died with the good old gent."

"No cheap talk. Do you stay in Honeysuckle for some time to come?"

"I may, ef my Royal Egyptian Ointment sells—"

"Cheese it! You are on the make—eh?"

"Money is good ter hev!" Deaf Drake agreed, in a husky, confidential whisper.

"And your conscience is easy—eh?"

"A good man's allays is."

"A have a good mind to box your dirty ears! You tire me, old tramp. But I like your style. If you stay in Honeysuckle I may yet have work for you. I don't suppose, if you get your money, that you care if it is a bit risky?"

"Yes, I am a good bit frisky," Eli agreed, with another attack of deafness; "but ain't nothin' ter what I was when a young chap. Nothin' was too rattle-headed fur me ter do then, an' I was a powerful favorite with the gals, ef I do say it. Why, many a time—"

"I don't care about that."

"I don't look like a flat? Thank ye—thank ye hearty, mum; I hope I ain't a flat. My eye-teeth hev cut through as thick as saw-teeth."

"Oh, hush up!" requested Nell, in her usual free-and-easy way. "I suppose you are a wise man to refuse to own up your ways, but I know you, vagabond. Are you short of money?"

"Yes, yes!" was the eager reply, and Eli's eyes glittered with sudden light.

"Here is ten dollars, and I may have more for you in due time, if you stay in Honeysuckle."

"Bless you, dear lady; bless—"

"Drop it! Mind you, this not a gift. Give me a bottle of your quack medicine. I don't suppose it will kill me, if I do no more than to look at it."

He had hurriedly produced a bottle, but its greasy appearance caused Nell to draw away.

"Set it down by the stone; I don't want to touch the disgusting thing!" she exclaimed.

Once more Mr. Drake's ears played him false, and he innocently returned.

"Will it keep until spring? Yes, yes; it will; an' be better than ever, mum. It improves with age, like wine. The royal Egyptians used ter hev it of all ages, an' when they had burns, boils, bruises or bunions—"

"Hush!"

Nell held up a warning finger. Some one had knocked at the door, and a cunning gleam appeared in her eyes. She believed that Cerberus had knocked, and that he had come to announce Cole Boylston's return.

Now, Madame Mystery was both crafty and treacherous. She was Cole's ally of the present and of the past, but her own interests were always considered first by her. She had made the semi-agreement with Deaf Drake, but did not know how she would use him, if at all. It was just as likely to be against Boylston as any one else, and she did not want that person to know that Eli had been there.

She arose, went to the door, found Cerberus, and learned that her supposition was correct.

Then she turned to Drake, put her lips close to his ear and spoke rapidly.

"Some one is coming, and I don't want you to be seen. I wish you to leave the room at once, hide in an alcove I will show you, and then pass quietly out when the man has entered here. Understand?"

The little gray eyes of the old man twinkled, and he nodded promptly.

"Yes, yes; all right. Always willin' ter give aid ter the fair sex. Runs in the blood. Put away the Royal Egyptian Ointment, an' you'll find it excellent fur burns, boils—"

Here Nell caught the speaker's ear and led him captive toward the door, but the circumstance did not check his flow of speech.

"Bruises an' bunions," he added. "Price, one dollar a bottle; six fur five!"

By this time Nell had him outside the door, and she next ran him into the alcove, much as though he was some humble dog. There she

left him with a warning gesture, touched a bell and retired to her own apartment.

Cole Boylston soon came up.

He was unsuspecting, but his short, sharp motions showed that he was not in good humor. Deaf Drake peered out of his covert and eyed him closely. Evidently, the ragged dispenser of the Egyptian Ointment did not let anything pass him by.

The moment that Cole closed the door, shutting himself in, Eli glided forward and thrust his maligned left ear close to the key-hole.

Madame Mystery had foreseen this possibility. She was too wise in worldly ways to pick up an old tramp and trust him implicitly. She did not place faith in his fidelity, but in his auricular trouble.

She might not have regarded his ears so lightly had she seen how confidently he put the despised left to the key-hole. Hard of hearing he might be, at times, but, on this occasion, his faith in the Royal Egyptian Ointment was not superior to the faith which, judging by his manner, he placed in his ears.

CHAPTER XI.

WAS IT SLANDER?

NATURALLY, the stranger in the pine-wood managed to secure Wyoming Zeke's interest at once, when he made the assertion that he had sent for the Hotspur to speak about The Demon of the Box.

Zeke looked at him with fresh curiosity.

"So you're the man who sent the box?" Zeke returned.

"I did not say so."

"At any rate, you have confessed that you know of it."

"Which fact has not been denied."

"Who are you?"

"Norris Dayton, by name."

"I never saw you before."

"That is your misfortune."

The stranger spoke in a light and airy way, as though some trivial subject was under discussion, but the Hotspur was not deceived as to his character.

There are men who are to their kind what buzzards are to the fowl kingdom—birds of prey too mean to be classed as eagles, yet sharp and dangerous to a marked degree. If Norris Dayton did not belong to that class, he was very unfortunate in his personal appearance.

Certainly, the brand was upon him.

"Well, what about the box?" Zeke sharply added.

"You received it?"

"I did."

"Benjamin Plymouth never look better than he does on wires."

"Was there ever such a man as Benjamin Plymouth?"

"There was."

"Who was he?"

"My friend."

"Come to the point! You have summoned me here to talk with me. Do so! I don't propose to draw out every point as painfully as teeth are drawn; I don't care enough about this absurd matter to do it. If you have a story to tell, get a move on you!"

"Directly, sir; directly. You must allow something for my feelings. My bereavement is too recent for me to be able to stand here and talk flippantly about poor Benjamin Plymouth!"

"If I read you aright, you would cheerfully witness the execution by Judge Lynch of any human being except yourself. Go on!"

"Thanks for your compliment. As for Benjamin, he was my partner during many a long day, season in and season out. Never a better one had man! Benjamin was gay and light of heart, and his manifold virtues shed around him a pleasant halo which was to his friends like a south wind right from Eldorado."

"Cloves would have changed the odor of his breath. Proceed!"

"But a change came o'er him, like a thunder-cloud sweeping up athwart a clear sky with its somber shape and ribald song. Benjamin Plymouth grew sad, drooped, died, made his will and was put on wires."

"Made his will after he died, did he?"

"Why object, when he gave all to you?"

"Why did he do it?"

"Because he saw *you* in the rapids where his life-boat went to pieces; because he saw *you* basking in the smiles of the same woman who ruined him."

"What woman?"

"I don't know of but one who has fascinated you. Her name is Lorraine Wilberley!"

"Mr. Dayton, you give me the first gleam of light you have deigned to show, and I want to say, right at the start, that the man who maligns Miss Wilberley in my presence is liable to get flogged like a cur!"

"Really?"

"Try it and see!"

To the airy question came a sharp, short answer, and, though Norris Dayton betrayed no emotion, outwardly, he knew that he had about run to the length of his rope. He had intentionally aggravated his companion, but was willing to halt. He deemed it prudent to do so; it re-

quired only one critical survey of Wyoming Zeke to awaken the suspicion that he would be a bad man to deal with when thoroughly aroused.

Dayton waved his hand deprecatingly. "We were speaking of Benjamin Plymouth," he observed. "Let us stick to our subject. Benjamin is dead, and, according to his last will and testament, his bones, neatly wired, are in your possession."

"I wish to say, right here, that I do not believe there was ever such a man as Benjamin Plymouth, or that any man, now dead, ever willed me his bones. The unfortunate whose skeleton was sent to me had never, I make bold to say, heard of me. It is a trick of a man, or of men, now living, and the bones are those of an unknown."

Zeke spoke firmly, but Dayton shrugged his shoulders without a trace of vexation or anger. "Unbeliever, you shall be convinced," he said.

"That is what I want—if you can do it." "The story is long; perhaps you had better send your friend away."

The Hotspur glanced to where Childeric Hall was sitting composedly at the foot of a tree.

"I shall not interfere with him."

"As you will—you shall have the story."

Dayton lighted a cigar, and then lay down on the pine needles and began his story. Zeke stood for a while, but finally sat down on a log.

"There were some extraordinary things in Benjamin Plymouth's career," Dayton commenced, "but they were not a part of himself. He was an ordinary man in all ways, except that he was more honest and conscientious than the average of his sex. He once set out to be a clergyman, but Nature rebelled; he was physically not strong enough for the study such a life demanded. He gave up the idea, but remained a very conscientious man."

Wyoming Zeke thought of The Demon of the Box, and the alleged last will and testament, and smiled sarcastically, but made no comment.

"Such," gravely remarked Dayton, "was the man's condition when he met Lorraine Wilberley. Do you follow me?"

"Yes."

"You will soon be in a labyrinth."

"Proceed."

"Benjamin Plymouth met Miss Wilberley, and that day marked a turning-point in his career. Forces that were new to him were stirred up, for when a man who has walked with his head in the clouds falls in love with a woman of the earth, the dickens is to pay."

"It is a curious fact that we judge men and women by ourselves. In all cases this is reckless, and never so much so as in an affair of the heart. All persons do not love alike—far from it. To begin with, not one person in three knows what love is, and those who do know, differ as much in their way of loving as they do in their other ways. How many persons ever stopped to realize and meditate on this fact?"

"One, at least; yourself. Go on!"

Zeke answered briefly, curtly, and Dayton nodded and continued:

"Lorraine Wilberley was young, beautiful, queenly, grand to look upon. She compelled admiration, as does a fine statue. She was not proud and haughty, but was calm and reserved. Such a woman is a mystery; she may be a placid lake, or a burning, hidden volcano."

"Skip the philosophical part," Zeke requested.

"Thanks—I will. They met, Plymouth and Miss Wilberley. How she was impressed I cannot say. He was entranced, bewildered, netted, amazed. He thought he had never before seen a woman like her. He admired, wooed, adored, worshiped. These are the four degrees of love. Ordinary men and women never go beyond the first two; Benjamin Plymouth took every degree, and laid his heart at her feet."

"Herein he erred. A wise man tenders to his adored one, not his heart, but his money. She will trample the one under her feet, but cherish the other. Women know the value of money. They are too selfish to care for hearts."

"Outwardly, the acquaintance of Benjamin and Lorraine went on smoothly. Formality gave place to friendly greeting; friendship to love; doubt to a formal engagement. Then his bliss seemed complete."

"Miss Wilberley, as you probably know—of course you've looked to it, like a wise man—is rich. All the Wilberleys are. Lawyer Eben is; Lorraine is. Money has run through the family as rheumatism does in some families."

"Now, there was one Wilberley who was particularly well fixed. His name was James, and he was a bachelor. Like most bachelors, he was cross-grained, surly, cynical and mean. He had been dissolute and profligate, once, but had grown to be a hermit and a miser."

"Mean as he was, his relatives adored him. Why not? He had money, and wealth furnishes, figuratively speaking, enough fig-leaves so that a mean man can be covered over bodily until he can't be told from an angel with diamond wings."

"His direct heirs would have been Eben and Rufus Wilberley had not Rufus been dead. As it was, the heirs were Eben and Lorraine."

Said Eben has five or six sons, but Lorraine was Rufus's only child. Excuse this attention to details, but I want you to see why she admired grim, mean old James."

"If he made no will, she would inherit just half a million."

"Rest the soul of old James! what a rumpus he made among his darling relatives. How they toadied to him! How the outsiders fairly tore their raiment to do the crabbed old fellow favors! How the direct heirs crept at his feet on their knees as a mute plea that he would never, never make a will!"

"But he made one!"

"That was a clincher, and a knock-down argument; and, when the direct heirs heard of it, they knocked their heads against the wall with rage. Perhaps Lorraine's head may even now display some dents and scars!"

"Stop!"

The stern command came from Wyoming Zeke, and the gleam in his eyes boded no good to Dayton.

"Well?"

"Moderate your language. I am patiently listening to your cynical, brutal story—which is probably all a lie—but I tell you fairly that you must be careful how you speak of Miss Wilberley. Speak of her again with such coarse, insolent familiarity and I will flog you!" Dayton shrugged his shoulders.

"I shall be glad to obey such a polite request," he answered, easily. "Let me resume:"

"The will being made, Tom, Dick and Harry were anxious to know what was in it. Who was favored? Who had got left? Nobody knew, but one thing was certain: the direct heirs had suffered more or less. If it had not been to prevent all the money going to Eben and Miss Lorraine—observe my respectful form of speech—why had any will been made?"

"The heirs gnashed their teeth."

"Now, I approach the darkest part of my story. One day Miss Lorraine talked with Benjamin Plymouth about all this, and observed that the will was in the office of Lawyer Carpenter."

"If that building, and its contents, was to burn," said she, "the will it would disappear forever!"

"Plymouth admitted the fact, but did not catch on. He was compelled to see, Miss Lorraine talked on, and gradually interested him. If the will were destroyed—if only it were destroyed! She rung the changes on that subject until she had him confused and feverish."

"In these days," she added, "the world is infested with dynamite fiends. If the building were blown up, would it not be attributed to agitators?"

"She looked into his face as she spoke; her breath fanned his cheek; her hand touched his, and her eyes gleamed like coals as she instilled the poison into his mind!"

Wyoming Zeke excitedly rose.

"Stop!" he commanded, threateningly.

CHAPTER XII.

THE HISTORY OF THE DEMON OF THE BOX.

DAYTON answered with an air of patient resignation;

"Well, what now?"

"What infamous falsehood are you about to tell?" Wyoming Zeke demanded.

"None."

"Did I not warn you not to slander Miss Wilberley?"

"Yes."

"Are you going to persist in doing so?"

"I am going to tell the story of Benjamin Plymouth, if you wish to hear it; if not, you can go to Halifax!" calmly replied Dayton.

Zeke was full of indignation. He longed to take this cool scoundrel and chastise him. He had grown to hate Mr. Norris Dayton bitterly. It was not that the man aggravated him, for that he could bear, but the attack upon Lorraine was too much to endure with composure. He was tempted to take Dayton at his word and end the interview, but the fact that this would leave himself at a disadvantage, decided him.

He resumed his seat, "Go on!" he said, sulkily.

"You break the thread of my remarks with your ill-mannered conduct, but I will finish. Where was I? Oh! I remember: Miss Lorraine was insinuating to Benjamin that if the will all the money would go to the direct heirs. Lorraine, lawyer's office and mill were all blown up, remember."

"Plymouth was slow to comprehend, but she made it clear. She proposed, in plain words, that he go and blow up the building, using dynamite which she had already secured."

"He was dumfounded and dismayed. He tried to treat it as a jest, but she declared that she was in earnest. Then horror seized upon him; the idea that one whom he so adored, who was so beautiful, could be so evil, was enough to stun him."

"He, however, did not waver; he declined to do her bidding."

"Then came the strangest part of all. She took his hands; she looked into his eyes; she murmured some strange words. A peculiar

feeling came over him. All things grew vague and unreal, and he appeared to be floating in air, but still she looked at him, held his hands, and murmured strange words."

"He felt his individuality leave him, and his will become subject to hers."

"Will you really desert me?" she asked.

"Never!" he answered, as a machine might;

"I am your slave in life and in death!"

"But you refuse to obey me."

"I repeat, I am your slave!" he replied.

"Then pay attention to my wishes."

"I will—I do!"

"Take the dynamite; go to the building, and blow it to chaos, secretly but surely."

"He shivered and did not answer, for his soul was sick in spite of her hold upon him, but she lifted him to his feet, and led him to where the dynamite was kept."

"Take this, and go to the work," she added.

"His brain was burning with fever, though his blood felt to him like ice; he was like one between life and death. An awful horror was upon him, but he could not resist. He was under a spell, and wholly subject to her will. Call it mesmerism or what you will, he was not his own master."

"Poor Plymouth! The misery he suffered then would never end in this world."

"He obeyed her; he took the dynamite, went to the building, entered secretly in a way she had mentioned, and arranged all with great skill. Then he departed."

"Half an hour later there was a great explosion, and the building was shaken to the earth. Fire sprung up, and all there was destroyed."

"Done by agitators!" was the general verdict, and only he and she knew the truth. She was exultant, for the will was swept out of sight; not a vestige remained, and dead James Wilberley would never make another. The property was hers."

"How she would have dealt with her mesmerized aid can never be known, for he was not to escape scot-free. A boy appeared who had seen him enter the building. He told his story, and Plymouth was arrested."

"Miss Lorraine's spell was no longer upon him, and he was horrified and sick at heart, but liberty was as much to him as to any other person. Coveting liberty, he waited for his betrothed to give him aid. It was not tendered, so he sent for her. She did not come. He wrote again, and that time he had an answer, brief, curt, cruel, deadly. She repudiated him; she refused even to see him."

"Even then he held his peace. He knew that he was not responsible for his deed. Before that fatal occasion he had seen her power; seen her put others into a trance; and he knew full well the spell that had been upon him. Yet, for her sake, he held his peace. She let him lie in prison, while she enjoyed James Wilberley's money."

"When the officers of law can't convict a prisoner they are so boiling mad that they keep him in prison until they, if possible, ruin his health."

"In Plymouth's case the evidence weakened and fell through, but he was held in close confinement, awaiting trial, for nearly two years. Then he was released."

"He came out broken in health and spirit. Lorraine Wilberley had deserted him and he did not know where she was. He came West for his health, but it was too late. He sunk steadily, nearing death daily. Of course his confinement had a good deal to do with it, but I shall always think that Miss Wilberley's treachery did more."

"She subjected him to her will by unnatural arts, compelled him to commit the crime, and then deserted him."

"Fate ordained that he should live to hear of you. During the time that he was in the West he worked patiently upon an idea which he had in his mind. He determined that his bones should be sent to Lorraine, and he planned how they could be wired together to work as you have seen them work. When it was done he explained the idea to me, and made me promise to carry out his wishes."

"He was very near his end when, by a strange chance, Lorraine appeared in Honeysuckle, only a few miles from where he lay dying. When he was told how you were fluttering, moth-like, around her, his plan changed, and he determined to send the strange gift to you."

"He made his will; he died. Then I kept my promise and sent the box to you. It contained all that remained of Benjamin Plymouth, the man whose love for Lorraine Wilberley cost him his honor and his life!"

Norris Dayton ceased speaking, and lighted a fresh cigar nonchalantly, but Wyoming Zeke did not speak.

He sat gazing at Dayton, and the latter looked away at vacancy, and the minutes came and went before either had a word to say.

It was Zeke who broke the silence.

"Dayton, what is your game?" he finally asked.

"I have none," was the calm reply.

"Why have you told me all this?"

"Because of my promise to Plymouth."

"What shall I pay you to keep the secret?"

Dayton looked around in surprise.

"Pay me!" he echoed. "That is something you can't do; your money would burn my fingers. Since you are afraid of publicity, I will say that you need feel no uneasiness. Benjamin Plymouth's orders were: 'Do not seek to avenge me; do not spread the story; leave her to the revenge of time!' His orders shall be obeyed!"

"In what way can I help you?"

Zeke spoke with quiet persistence, but Dayton made an angry gesture.

"I would not accept a favor from you under any condition."

"Then what is your game?"

"Haven't I told you that I have none?" was the sharp inquiry.

"You have," Zeke admitted. "But I know that you have a secret motive. I decline to believe a word of your yarn, and I thought perhaps you were after blackmail."

"More fool you!"

"Your motive will appear in due time."

"Believe me, or believe your own theory, as you choose. I don't care a cent. From this day you and I are strangers. I have obeyed my friend's directions and you have his mortal remains. No doubt you will keep the same to look at. But, when you do, remember that what you see is all that remains of a man who loved Lorraine Wilberley, not wisely but too well."

"Liar!" the Hotspur exclaimed.

"Sir?"

"I repeat, the story which you have told was a foul lie from beginning to end!"

Dayton continued to smoke, and did not evince any excitement.

"Are you a good shot, Wyoming Zeke?"

"Yes."

"Then I challenge you to fight a duel to the death!"

"I accept. Let me call Childeric Hall, and he shall give the word."

"Wait! Before I pop you over I want to give you some proof that I have told the truth. Can you be convinced in any way?"

"Yes."

"How?"

"Go with me to see Lorraine!"

Dayton nodded in a satisfied way.

"The idea is good, and I will drop around to-night."

"To-night! So you wish to defer it? You dare not go now. I challenge you to go now!"

Dayton bounded to his feet.

"Come on!" he cried. "You are very free with your tongue, and I will first humiliate and then shoot you. It was Plymouth's wish that I should have no trouble with you, but he could not foresee what a stubborn mule you would prove. I will go with you and face Lorraine Wilberley. Will that convince you?"

"When done, it will."

"It shall be done speedily; I am not reluctant to humble her. Come, my doughty talker; come, and we will ask our young lady how black her soul is!"

CHAPTER XIII.

HOW LORRAINE RECEIVED THEM.

FACE to face stood Wyoming Zeke and Norris Dayton. The latter was not so calm as he had been, for the blunt words applied to him had aroused his anger, while the Hotspur was gaining strength with every moment.

He had been excited by what he regarded as the groundless aspersions upon Lorraine's reputation, but the story was finished at last, and in the attempt to clear her, in his own eyes, he could be like a veritable rock.

Not yet did he believe the story which Dayton had told. Considered critically, it had weak points. None, perhaps, were too doubtful to be reconciled to fact, but they were suspicious. In addition to this, he would not believe Lorraine guilty of the crimes charged to her.

Benjamin Plymouth he regarded, not as a man lately deceased, but as a myth, a concoction of Dayton's fertile mind.

Firm as his companion was at that time, he did not believe he would dare to confront Lorraine.

The Hotspur called to Childeric Hall, who came promptly. He had been surprised at the duration of the interview, but had kept his distance.

"Hall," said Zeke, "your services are wanted."

"Command me!" the schoolmaster replied.

"I am to fight a duel."

Childeric started; he had not anticipated anything so serious as that.

"This person," the Hotspur added, indicating Dayton, "and I, have agreed to settle certain differences with our revolvers."

"Impossible!" Hall exclaimed.

"Why so?"

"It would be barbarous."

"But not out of place with barbarians."

"He knows his value," put in Dayton.

"And yours," calmly returned Zeke. "The duel, Hall, will not take place now, but a time to be settled later. I rely upon you to act as my second."

The schoolmaster looked greatly troubled.

"Mr. Eliphalet Hodge will be seriously annoyed if he hears of this."

"That for Hodge!" interrupted Dayton, snapping his fingers.

"Be careful how you refer to him!" exclaimed Hall, warningly.

"I apologize. I don't want to fight all Honey-suckle at once, and as you are on your ear, I will say that I meant no disrespect to Old Humility. As to the duel, I will find a friend to confer with you on the subject. Are you ready, Zeke?"

"I am."

"Then let's be off to see Miss Wilberley."

The cool knave set the example by starting, but the Hotspur kept by his side. The latter was still inclined to doubt that Dayton would persist. For him to face Lorraine would be to settle the matter, it seemed, one way or the other. The outlook did not please Ralston. If Dayton dared face Miss Wilberley it must be because his cause was good.

If that was true, what of her?

If his cause was good, hers could not be.

There was silence between the two men as they returned to the village. Ralston was occupied with his thoughts, and Dayton did not interrupt him. The Hotspur had no inclination to talk with his companion on trivial subjects. Other matters had forced the subject of the duel out of his mind, but he felt that he saw in Dayton a man who was to be his bitter enemy, and a dangerous one, at that.

If hostilities were temporarily suspended, it did not promise anything favorable for the future.

They reached the village and moved toward Old Humility's house. As they did so Zeke looked up and saw Lorraine at an upper window.

She had not observed them, but, even as he looked, her gaze fell and rested upon them. Then he saw a swift change appear in her beautiful face—a surprised, startled look—and she abruptly stepped back and disappeared.

Whether Dayton saw her Ralston did not know, but the circumstance caused Zeke's courage to disappear entirely. Lorraine had no cause to be afraid of him, and it was evident that sight of Dayton had caused her sudden alarm.

That appeared to herald the worst.

Unconsciously, the Hotspur's steps grew slow. Was he not doing a cruel deed to bring his companion there and force the girl to see him? For a moment the lover's resolution failed, and he was tempted to abandon the test, but it would be a complete triumph for the sneering wretch by his side—he determined to go on.

There was no trouble in gaining entrance to the house, and Dayton took it upon himself to direct the servant. He rapidly wrote upon a card, and submitted it to Ralston for inspection.

"Mr. Zeke Ralston, and Mr. Norris Dayton, would be pleased to see Miss Wilberley for a moment."

The Hotspur read, and, looking up, met the writer's gaze.

"All right?" questioned Dayton, carelessly.

Zeke nodded. He could not trust his voice to reply.

"Go, Susan Jane!" added the arch-enemy, airily, "and present this to the fair Miss Wilberley!"

The servant shot him an angry glance. The modern girl has a lofty contempt for old-fashioned names, and as this particular one was named Hattie Evelyn, she felt like scratching the man's face for calling her "Susan Jane."

She took the card and went in silence.

Ralston sat down gloomily, but Dayton thrust his hands into his pockets and wandered about the room, looking at the pictures. Old Humility had collected quite a line in this way, and Agnes's good judgment had caused a wise selection.

Hattie Evelyn was not long absent. She returned with her head thrown well back, looking as though she were an Alaric who had just humbled Rome.

"Miss Wilberley sends word," she distinctly, slowly announced, "that she will be pleased to see Mr. Ralston in the room above, but that she will not see Norris Dayton under any condition!"

Hattie Evelyn had thought to crush the audacious man who had given her a homely name, but he turned upon Zeke with a smile in which triumph was very perceptible.

"You see," he remarked, significantly.

The Hotspur did see; it looked as though Lorraine was afraid to face the man. He did not answer, and Dayton finally added:

"I await your orders!"

Ralston saw a sheet of paper on the table, and he hurriedly wrote this note:

"MISS WILBERLEY:—

"Far be it from me to suggest a line of conduct to you, but my present companion has made some singular statements in regard to you. I thought you would, perhaps, like to deny them. Use your own judgment; but of one thing rest assured—Norris Dayton is not a friend of mine. Far from it."

"E. E. RALSTON."

"Please take this to Miss Wilberley," he said, addressing Hattie Evelyn.

"Certainly, sir," the girl answered, with all

the alacrity imaginable; and she went out with a warm spot in her heart for the handsome Hotspur, and a strong desire to assault Dayton with a broom or some other weapon.

It was not long before she brought an answer.

"MR. RALSTON:—

"I am glad to hear that the person with you is not your friend, for he is a scoundrel. No doubt he has spoken ill of me, but I will not flatter him by making a defense. If you can induce him to leave the house, I shall be glad to see you."

"LORRAINE WILBERLEY."

There was encouragement in the last statement, and Zeke's face brightened. He looked up and saw Dayton regarding him curiously. The latter carelessly asked:

"Verdict reversed?"

"No."

"A crumb of comfort, however."

"The lady declines to see you."

"Can I see her note?"

"No!"

"Very well; it is immaterial. I anticipated this. We asked her to submit to a severe trial when we proposed this interview. She was too wise to comply. Let it pass. Events have shown you that all I claimed was true, and we need not blazon the evidence on the walls of Rome, so to speak. Do you accompany me away?"

"No."

"I will see you presently. My friend will wait upon Hall, and make arrangements for the little affair of honor. Good-day!"

Ralston made no answer, and Dayton took his departure in a confident, airy way. He seemed to consider that he had won a decided victory, but the Hotspur found food for hope in the final clause of Lorraine's letter. When he had seen Dayton well away from the house, he directed Hattie Evelyn to inform Miss Wilberley of the situation, and was promptly summoned to her presence.

She was alone, and her manner was fairly calm, but there was enough that was unnatural to show that she had been more than trivially moved by what had occurred. She greeted him kindly, and he answered with some embarrassment.

"We may as well come to business at once," she observed, in a steady voice.

"I trust, Miss Wilberley, that you will not misconstrue my connection with this affair."

"Certainly not."

"I never saw Dayton until to-day, and am prepared to believe that he is a villain."

"You do him no injustice."

"I came here only to—to give you a chance—to deny what he has said."

Ralston hesitated and stumbled over the speech, sought for the best possible words, and felt, when done, that he had selected the very worst.

"I can readily believe that he has said no good of me, but I shall not take the trouble to defend myself."

Zeke's face fell. In her presence he was under an influence which made him feel positive that she could easily demolish Dayton's accusation. Her intended course did not meet with his approval.

"There are men too contemptible to be noticed," she added.

"I agree with you that he is mean and low, but—"

He hesitated, paused, and she returned:

"But what?"

"I am sure that no blame attaches to you, but would it not be well for you to hear an outline of what he has asserted?"

"I do not care for him or his vicious attacks!" she declared, with an impatient gesture.

"But he may have spoken falsely, in whole or in part," Zeke urged.

"I presume he told the truth!"

The Hotspur was dismayed to the point of silence. Did she, could she confess all that Dayton had alleged? If she had been calm and indifferent, he would have summoned courage enough to say that it was imperatively necessary that she should listen, but his judgment and his will were weakened by her manner.

Plainly, his persistence was proving a severe trial to her. Her voice was unsteady, and her lips quivered. He thought that if he tried to tell the story she would utterly lose composure, and he did not feel capable of forcing the point upon her.

His affection weakened him, and, though he was dismayed by her last words, he yielded to his heart rather than his head. It was she who broke the silence:

"We will drop Norris Dayton," she finally added, "and I advise you to ignore him if you ever meet again. He is all that is vile and mean. As for what he has said of me, let it rest. We are none of us perfect, and for my sins of commission and omission, in the past, I can offer only regret. Please do not refer to this affair again, for I must bear the burden!"

CHAPTER XIV.

THE BLOW DEALT BY A FRIENDLY HAND.

THE decree had gone forth, and Wyoming Zeke felt that he could do no more than to bow to it.

There are times when one's judgment is wholly at fault, and the Hotspur could not be blamed for having a moment of weakness when he saw the woman whom he loved, so plainly in mental distress.

"No doubt, you are right," he agreed.

"We cannot undo the past," Lorraine added, "and no earthly power can make crime anything but crime."

She arose as she spoke and moved nervously across the room. It was plain that she was in no mood for an interview, and Ralston felt that the wisest thing he could do was to take himself out of her presence and give her time to recover tranquillity.

He tried to make the parting commonplace.

"Well, I'll leave you now," he said, briskly. "Childer Hall expects me, and I need not keep him waiting."

"Shall I see you again, soon?"

As Lorraine asked the question, she came around the table and confronted him, looking eagerly, anxiously, into his face.

"Thank you," he answered; "I shall be pleased to call again before long."

"You will always be welcome."

"Thank you, again; I shall try your patience to the utmost by coming often."

All this was very well, as far as words went, but the undercurrent was not so fair and pleasant. Zeke spoke lightly, in about the same way that he would have done had he known nothing of Dayton's story, but that dark, horrible story would rise before him, and he felt painfully anxious to get away and think it over. Commonplace as the parting was, he could not but feel that they might never meet again. Lorraine had admitted that Dayton had probably told the truth, and had refused to defend herself. As for the story, it was enough to kill any man's love, if true.

And Lorraine seemed to feel the danger of its being a final separation. She looked into his eyes in a strange way, as though she would read every thought in his mind, and her manner was subdued and sad.

Half unconsciously he put out his hand, and it was met by hers. The contact was not agreeable. Her temperature was unnaturally low; his was feverishly warm.

Each broke the hold as though it was unpleasant.

"Good-day!" added Ralston, trying to seem at ease.

"Good-day!"

Her voice was very low and none too firm.

He made a trivial remark about the weather and went out. As he passed down the street, he tried to assume a light, brisk manner. His first impulse was not to look back; he obeyed the second, and saw her at the window. He raised his hat; she bowed; he went on and saw her no more on that occasion.

He drew a long, broken breath.

"This is maddening!" he uttered, huskily.

The full force of the latest developments occurred to him then. Dayton had made charges which, if true, branded Lorraine as a criminal, and that, too, of a type so radical that nothing could excuse her. She refused to explain, to defend herself, or to hear the exact charges.

Was this the way of an innocent woman?

Wyoming Zeke would not have hesitated in making a decision had the case been that of any one else than Lorraine. As it was, he was supremely wretched.

Since meeting her, the Hotspur had felt a desire to change his mode of life, and Lorraine was as essential to the change as was the air he breathed to the prolongation of life. He had never yet ventured to declare his affection, but he believed that it was understood and reciprocated.

Although he was for the time figuring in the West as a mere idle wanderer, she could not object to him on the score of worldly position or wealth.

He could match any one in the first respect, and had all necessary financial means.

Everything had seemed to be progressing well, but recent events had been like a crushing blow.

Ralston walked home in an unenviable frame of mind. When he left Childer Hall in the pines, he had not had any understanding as to where they were to meet, but for once, at least, he hoped Hall would keep away. He wanted to lock himself into his room and be alone.

He opened the door and entered, but had a shock at the start. The first thing he saw was The Demon of the Box, standing upright, and the spectacle sent a cold shiver along the Hotspur's spine. After what had occurred, and in the light of the story of Benjamin Plymouth's life and death, the relic of mortality was something horrible beyond description.

The thing had been left boxed up, and Zeke was at first surprised, but the change was explained when he saw a living occupant of the room. Eben Wilberley, the lawyer, arose and moved forward.

"How are you, Ralston?" was his greeting. "I hope you will forgive me for walking in uninvited."

"Not at all—certainly," muttered Zeke, confusedly.

"I called, found you out, and waited."

"You did right, sir; I am glad to see you."

This was one of the polite fictions for which we all hope to be forgiven. Usually the Hotspur would have been glad to see Lorraine's uncle, but not then.

"Been for a walk?" the old lawyer asked.

"Yes, sir."

"Fine day for it. Should have been out myself, only for a touch of rheumatism in my knee. Some lucky man will some day discover a cure for rheumatism, and then all the world will fall at his feet and call him blessed!"

"No doubt!"

"My bones feel as dry and rickety as yonder skeleton's. I hope you'll forgive me for letting him out of his box, for I wanted cheerful company."

"I trust he proved such."

"Indeed, he did. Not an uncivil word has passed between us, nor has he done aught to irritate me. If I had him on the witness-stand he might not suit me, nor give ready and intelligent replies; but how could we punish him for contempt of court?"

"Not easy to do."

"No. A grim-looking fellow is our Benjamin Plymouth. I fear we could not say of him as Hamlet did of Yorick, that he was 'a fellow of infinite jest, of most excellent fancy.' Benjamin's jest was scurvy, and his fancy was diabolical. Ah! you're going to box him!"

"Yes."

Zeke could not endure the sight of The Demon, and he forced him back into the box roughly. The old lawyer did not notice his companion's mood.

"The Demon's impassive manner is striking, but not lofty. We can't admire him as we do a fine statue; it is more like a person mesmerized. Did you ever have experience in that line?"

The question recalled the fact that Dayton had alleged that Lorraine mesmerized Benjamin Plymouth in order to make him obey her wishes and blow up the building which contained old James Wilberley's will, and it irritated him.

He returned a curt negative.

"I am a practical man," continued Eben, "and I refuse to believe in ghosts, spiritualism or anything else of the sort, but I admit that there are some things about it which I can't understand. I don't want to; I'm afraid of the black art. We might have had a medium right in our own family had we seen fit. One of our Wilberley daughters, for sport, once told a girl-friend that she was going to put her to sleep, and forthwith made a series of passes and mumbled a few words—all as a joke, mind you—but, by Jove! sir, the young friend went off in an unnatural sleep, from which she could not be awakened until *commanded* to arouse by the person who had put her to sleep. Who do you suppose this was?"

"I don't know."

"It was Lorraine! Yes, sir; she put the other girl off to sleep as sound as a bear in winter; mesmerized her. What do you think of that?"

Zeke had arisen and gone to the window, thus hiding his face from Wilberley intentionally. If the latter could have seen the expression thereon he might have been startled by the mute evidence of what the young man thought of it. Zeke was alarmed. The old lawyer had unconsciously furnished evidence to prove that Lorraine could, and had, subjected others to her will to a certain degree.

Dayton's claim that she had done thus to Benjamin Plymouth was vividly recalled.

The Hotspur managed to make a brief reply, and Eben went on in serene unconsciousness of the damage he was doing.

"All this alarmed Lorraine, and she never would try her influence in that way again. Yes; there is something odd in spiritualism which, in my opinion, can't be explained by the frequent exposure of frauds. I might doubt all else, but I know that Lorraine's case was sincere and true. I don't suppose you are a spiritualist?"

"Decidedly not."

"Nor I. Heaven is said to be a place of rest, peace and happiness. How can that be, if spirits are wandering around among us, never resting, and always seeing the woes and sins of the friends they left behind them? However, every man has a right to his own opinion. Eh?"

"Certainly, sir."

"Don't mention to Lorraine what I've told you. With good cause or poor, as you please, she has always been actually ashamed of her single experience in that line. I dare say, however, that she would make a good medium, and would be a drawing card for some one to take around over the country and exhibit. Thank fortune, she would not agree to it, were she ever so poor. By the way, it is probable that one-half of her money and mine came to us by chance."

"Is that so?"

"Yes. A few years ago a rich relative, James Wilberley, died. Lorraine and I were the heirs, but it was a well-known fact that

James had made a will. That meant that we were not to get all. The will was destroyed by accident, and as James and his lawyer were both dead, no human being knew how he intended to dispose of his money. Hence, Lorraine and I had to take it."

Zeke Ralston shivered like one swept by an icy wind. Was another link of evidence forming?

"How was the will destroyed?" he asked, in a low, unnatural voice.

"James and his lawyer had both just died, but the will was in the office formerly occupied by the lawyer, and, at the time, by his surviving partners. Some one—it was never learned definitely who—exploded a dynamite cartridge in the building; it came to the ground in a heap; a fire sprang up and burned everything, the will included."

The Hotspur stood like one turned to stone. All this exactly agreed with what Dayton had said.

"We divided up a comfortable sum among those we thought the most likely to have been remembered in the will," continued the lawyer, "and then kept the rest."

"I don't suppose," said Ralston, in a hard voice, "that Benjamin Plymouth was one of the heirs?"

"Ha! ha! Hardly!"

"And you never heard the name?"

"Never, until you got the box at Hodge's."

Zeke hesitated. He was reluctant to meddle with Lorraine's affairs, after she had made a decision, but he could not avoid asking one more question:

"Was any one arrested for blowing up the building?"

"Yes."

"Who?"

"His name was Redmond Drew."

"Was he proved innocent?"

"Released for want of evidence."

"Where is he now?"

"I don't know; and, Mr. Ralston, if you will excuse me, we will not pursue the subject. There are urgent reasons why I want never to hear Redmond Drew's name!"

CHAPTER XV.

ZEKE IS WANTED.

THE old lawyer spoke with perceptible irritation. Obviously, he was not angry at Zeke, but, just as plainly, the latter had touched a sensitive spot. Wilberley had mentioned Redmond Drew only to give him the role which, according to Dayton, had been filled by Benjamin Plymouth, and the latter's identity seemed to be revealed.

More than that, Dayton's story was confirmed.

After giving a certain amount of corroborative evidence, Eben had shut down completely and barred out the subject.

Zeke was not sorry. He had already heard enough—too much. He wished then that he had never seen Honeysuckle; never seen Lorraine. Where now was hope that she would be proved innocent? How could she be, when overwhelming evidence encompassed her?

He still stood at the window, not daring to face the lawyer, and wishing him a hundred miles away. Wilberley's previous good humor, too, had received a check. Recollection had called up scenes which, apparently, were far from pleasant.

At this juncture the door was opened without the ceremony of knocking. Ralston turned with an air of irritation, and saw the disreputable peddler of ointment, Deaf Drake. The man was as ragged and dirty as ever, and, if Zeke had previously been alone, he would have ordered him out. As it was, it occurred to him that if he could play the two men against each other for a while, he would have an opportunity to regain his own calmness.

Mr. Eli Drake came in confidently.

"Good-morrer, gentle sirs!" he said, in his husky whisper. "I hope I see ye as wal as I be. Don't—don't rise on my account!"

No one had made a movement to rise, but Eli accompanied his last words with a gesture to the same effect.

"Don't stan' on ceremony with me," he added. "Between men like us formality needn't be stood onter, nohow, an' I'd rather you'd keep yer seats. Please do!"

"Who in thunder had any idea of doing otherwise?" demanded Wilberley. "Also, what band of 'horribles' do you belong to, and what name do you drag down into the mud with you?"

"Me? Oh! I'm old Eli Drake, though some calls me Deaf Drake, thinkin' the hearin' o' my auricular organs ain't as cute as some. That's wrong; nobody has better hearin'. By profession I'm a dispenser o' the Royal Egyptian Ointment, an infallible specific fur burns, bruises, boils, bunions—"

"That'll do!" interrupted Wilberley. "We don't want you or your ointment, and don't care for the alleged facts."

"What's the tax?" returned Drake, his treacherous ears playing him false. "I tax a dollar a bottle, or six fur five. Six fur five, an' cheap as dirt!"

"Dirt must be cheap around your parts, judging by the amount you've brought in."

"Will it discolor the skin? No, sir; it won't. It's so pure an' wholesome that sassiety belles use it ter rub on their faces jest afore a ball, ter make the paint an' powder stick."

"See here, Ralston, what sort of an original distemper have we here?" the lawyer asked, in disgust.

"A tramp whom I've met before."

"How many epidemics do you suppose he's liable to give us?"

"I can't say, but his alleged line of trade is ointment, as he has told you."

"Humph! I'm not in need of the article, and can't look upon such a bundle of rags and dirt as a long-lost brother. If he wasn't so deaf, I'd like to talk with him."

"Raise your voice higher."

"You forget that Nature provides us with but one set of bronchial tubes. However, here goes. Old man"—here the lawyer raised his voice as though he had a contumacious witness in the court-room—"if I understand your case, you have a mission to visit mankind, heal their wounds and ease their hurts?"

"Hev I got two shirts?" huskily returned Drake. "Yes; I hev. Want ter buy?"

Wilberley recoiled.

"Heaven forbid that I should wear any of your garments. Say you, are you stone deaf?"

"Not at all, sir—not an artom. Sometimes I don't hear, but it's owin' ter the weak lungs o' them who speak. Ef you'll rub some o' the Royal Egyptian Ointment from yer clavicle down ter the pit o' yer stomach, it'll increase the dynameter an' circumfluence o' yer lungs amazin'. It's sold dirt cheap; only one dollar a bottle, or six fur five. It has no ekuls, an' few superiors."

"I've got enough!" declared Wilberley. "He's your guest, Ralston; take him to your bosom, or throw him out, just as you please."

"Yes, I kin hear you wheeze," asserted Eli, glibly, "an' nothin' kin help it like the Ointment. Bathe yer neck in it, rubbin' wal on the jog'ler, an' bind in red flannel. It'll do the biz. I'm swathed inter it from head ter foot, an' I git younger ev'ry day. Price, one dollar; six fur five!"

Eli could not get out of his husky whisper, but he was as cheerful and glib as though he owned ail of Honeysuckle.

Wyoming Zeke advanced to his side and shouted in his ear:

"See here, old man! I've bought of you once to-day, and I can do no more. Go sell elsewhere, or don't sell at all. I don't keep open house here. See?"

"Yes, yes; I hear wal enough. Never was troubled with weakness o' the auricular colyumb. A cannon-ball might be fired inter one ear an' out o' t'other, an' it wouldn't effect my hearin'—ef the ears was somebody's else's ears."

The vagabond appeared to be in his usual mood, but he had done more than talk. While standing by Zeke, and out of the lawyer's line of vision, he had deftly slipped a folded paper into the Hotspur's hands. When it was done, he continued to talk in the old way, but there was a crafty air about him which was all the more striking because it was so concealed by his mask of innocence.

"Nobody kin use the Ointment without bein' helped, an' it's pertic'lar good in obtuse an' myster'us cases. A man down in Blue Hoss Camp thought he had chilblains an' used it for them. Reelly, his case was measles, but it brung 'em out, an' he got wal. A woman in P'isen Ivy City had had a ragin' toothache fur goin' on several or more years. She used it, and heaved up a quirrilsome temper from her stum-mick, an' got wal. She ain't scolded sence. It's only one dollar a bottle, or six fur five."

"Buy him out!" groaned the lawyer.

"Will I take suthin' hot?" quoth Eli. "Don't mind ef I do, an' you may make it seven parts whisky. I'll mix in the t'other things a few days arter takin' the fu'st seven."

"You shall have the drink you covet, and here is the money," replied Ralston. "Leave us now, my good man!"

He shoved Eli toward the door, and the latter did not resist. When beyond Wilberley's sight the dull look on his face gave place to one of intelligence; he looked up and winked wisely.

"I'll wait fur ye below," he whispered; then raised his voice and added distinctly: "Use the Ointment eight times a day, an' rub in wal. The old Egyptians found great pleasure in usin' it, an' when they lost a leg, arm, nose, or eye in battle, they could grow out a new 'un in a week simply by puttin' on the peerless cure. A man named Argus used it fur a lost eye, and grew out sev'ral gross o' eyes with one gross o' Ointment. One dollar a bottle, or six fur—"

The remainder was lost; Ralston closed the door after him, and returned to the lawyer.

"A most dirty, voluble and persistent knave, but nobody's fool," observed Wilberley.

Zeke agreed with him, but did not give all his grounds for thinking so. He could not say whether Deaf Drake was a knave, but he certainly was not foolish.

The Hotspur put the folded paper away quietly, and then, having recovered his composure,

proceeded to entertain his guest, but Wilberley did not worry him long. When he had gone, and Zeke was left alone, he proceeded to examine the paper. It proved to be a very brief note, and read as follows:

"WYOMING ZEKE:—If agreeable to you, I should be glad to see you this evening at my quarters. It is a matter of business in which you are chiefly interested, and, by coming, you will hear something of value. Please regard this communication as private, and mention it to no one until you have seen me. MADAME MYSTERY."

The Hotspur pondered over this missive for some time, and then went to look for Deaf Drake. That disreputable-looking person was at hand, and a motion brought him to the room.

Ralston took position close to his right ear and opened the catechism.

"Where did you get this letter?" he asked.

"Got it from the charmin' female who reads the past, present, futur' an' intermediate," Drake answered, promptly.

"Madame Mystery?"

"That same."

"Where did you see her?"

"In her temple o' mystery."

"Did she send for you?"

"No. Went ter hev' my futur' unrolled like a map. I allays did feel that there was somethin' in store fer me, an' I even imagined that I could see the ladder leadin' up ter the pinnacle o' glory. I've pooty nigh reached it in becomin' a curer o' burns, boils, bruises—"

"And Madame Mystery gave you this note to bring to me, did she?"

"She did, pardner."

"What did she say?"

"Said ter give it to ye on the sly."

"What more?"

"Nothin' more."

Ralston regarded Eli critically. It did not add to his faith in the man to find that he was her messenger.

"How long have you known the Far-Seer?"

"Never seen her afore ter-day."

"Have you entered her service?"

Deaf Drake made a deprecating gesture. "Perish the idee! The snows o' between sixty an' fifty-one summers are ont'er my marble brow, an' out o' the store o' wisdom I hev' gained, one thing hev' I I'arned fer a fact—the man who lets hisself out ter a woman is tee-totally undone!"

CHAPTER XVI.

NELL BAITS THE HOOK.

DEAF DRAKE wagged his bushy head and looked wise, but Ralston was not yet satisfied. He was suspicious. When he saw Spitfire Nell at Old Humility's house he had marked her as an unscrupulous and dangerous woman, but, at that time he had not expected that she would ever cross his path again, and cared little for her qualities, good or bad.

Recent developments, however, had shown that the spirit of evil was rampant at Honeysuckle, and he could not regard this summons lightly.

But what about Eli Drake? Was he only a chance messenger, as he had claimed, or was he her ally and confidant?

He questioned the dispenser of the healing Ointment further, but, though he met with very prompt answers, failed to learn any more or find food for suspicion.

One thing impressed him as peculiar, however.

"See here, my man!" he directed, "haven't you suddenly got rid of your deafness? I have lowered my voice almost to its natural key, yet you have had no trouble in hearing what I said."

"Is the deafness in my head? Yes; I s'pose it is about all located thar, fur the tin-pan o' the ear is cracked six diff'rent ways. 'Twas done by a gal singin' a new-fangled song inter it. Her screechin' give me inflammatory rheumatics o' the brain, an' I was a ragin' maniac fur between eleven months. I got over that, but the deafness remains, an' when I go ter a perletikel meetin', I can't tell whether the speaker is a Whig or a Tory in principle, so I ain't got no principles in politics. As you say, I hear better at times nor I do t'otherwise, an' sometimes I ain't so deaf as them who calls me so."

"I suspect that your deafness is all a sham."

"I must be as meek as a lamb? Wal, I do try ter be meek. Yes, sir; I try ter be long-sufferin' an' forgivin'."

"I perceive that your trouble has come back."

"You would hit 'em a crack? Wal, wal, that will do fur a young man, but an' ol' feller like me can't fight much; so I let 'em say I be deaf, an' take no notice ont'."

"You are a fraud, Deaf Drake! Mind you, I don't say you are a rascal, for that isn't proved; but your deafness is a pretense. You hear, or you don't hear, as the fancy strikes you, and said fancy is usually perverse. Now, then, unless you have more business, I'll ask you to go."

"Shall we meet ag'in?"

"Perhaps."

"When you need more Ointment let me know."

"I will."

"You'll find it excellent fur burns, bruises—"

"No doubt!"

Eli was still lingering, blinking a pair of watery eyes and growing more husky of voice, but Zeke took him by the collar and led him to the door.

All this was done without temper, and the old fellow did not appear to be vexed in the least degree. The Hotspur gave him a dime and then closed the door upon him, after which Drake went down-stairs and tried to sell his Royal Egyptian goods until the hotel clerk ejected him from the building.

Ralston locked the door, and read Madame Mystery's note again. It had a fascination for him, but not one of pleasure. Recent events had so fashioned his mind that it was very ready to receive certain impressions, and suspicion was one of them.

He suspected that his fair correspondent had some scheme in her mind, and one not to her credit, but he did not hesitate as to his course—he determined to visit her.

Childeric Hall soon made his appearance, and Zeke broke one commandment of the note; he showed it to the schoolmaster, and asked his opinion.

Little came of it. Hall knew Spitfire Nell no better than did the Hotspur, and had no better ground for the opinion which he finally gave, to the effect that, very likely the woman was in union with the discordant elements in and around Honeysuckle.

Evening came, and Ralston left the hotel, and went to make the visit. Cerberus at once conducted him to the Far-Seer's presence.

Madame Mystery was in, and more than that, she was fairly resplendent. She was richly dressed in garments and trimmings of gorgeous colors, yet all was in such perfect harmony that the most captious of her own sex could not have ridiculed her choice. In her ears glittered diamonds, and one superb ring of the same sort was visible on her left hand—the only ornament on her white, shapely fingers.

She arose and greeted Zeke with the matchless grace of a woman of the world, tempering the reception with a cordiality which would have pleased a vain man.

"I am very glad to see you, Mr. Ralston!" she announced, giving him her hand.

"Thank you," he responded, somewhat stiffly.

"I did not know whether you would come."

"Oh, I received your note," was the non-committal reply.

"Well, I am pleased to see you, and now let us forget that in business I am a fortune-teller. This is not a matter of trade."

"I remember that you've already told my fortune."

"And given you a good one," Nell added, with a liquid laugh.

"There were conditions attached."

"There are conditions to the privilege of living."

"Doubtless. I don't fully comprehend, but I'm thankful that I'm alive."

"So am I, or I should not have the pleasure of entertaining you."

"It would be a great loss to you."

"It would, indeed!"

While keeping up the conversation briskly, Nell had seen that a chair was placed for him, and both had become seated. She took a position which, in its ease, grace, and freedom from restraint was a further tribute to her cunning; and she smiled upon him with good will to men in general, and Wyoming Zeke in particular; but she evinced a disposition to keep conversation on trivial subjects, which did not suit him.

Whatever might be her purpose, he had not come there to act the Romeo to her Juliet.

"I don't set high value on myself," he answered, with critical calmness. "But what about your note?"

"I sent it because I had news for you. The messenger was not an Adonis."

"Not unless he was disguised," Zeke agreed, grimly.

"He came here to sell some miserable patent medicine, and I employed him. He seems to be an honest, simple-minded fellow."

"Honest as the day is long!" Ralston deposed, boldly.

"But none too clean."

"Not for beauty. Old friend of yours?"

"I never saw him until to-day. By the way, you must highly enjoy your wild, roving life."

"Yes."

"I wish I were a man, so that I could live in the same way."

"It's great, madame; but we are forgetting business. You wished to see me, I believe."

A slight shade flitted across Nell's face. Whatever she had to say, the object nearest her mind was to enjoy herself in Zeke's company, and impress him favorably. She had tried to keep the conversation away from serious subjects, while it was just as plain that he was anxious to avoid unnecessary words. She realized this, and felt chagrined, but was too wise to exhibit ill temper.

She was casting a matrimonial net for Zeke, and was too good a fisher to scare away the fish. She was leaving no visible loophole of escape,

and, while he was eying the net, he might run upon a dangling, baited hook, and be landed in spite of himself.

"I will proceed to business," she returned, sweetly. "I have not promised something of importance without being able to make good my words."

She arose, went to a curtain of heavy cloth which hung at one side of the room, and swept it aside.

"What do you see?" she added.

"Nothing but the blank wall," Zeke replied.

She touched the aforesaid wall, and a section receded on well-oiled hinges, without noise, revealing a space behind which was like a closet.

"A good hiding-place," she observed.

"Yes. Do you run a house built like an old-time castle, with secret doors, sliding panels, traps and the like?"

"This is all that I have of the kind. Observe how cunningly it is constructed. You and I might hide there and overhear an interview in this room, and no one be the wiser. If the curtain was thrown back, at first, it would reveal only the wall, exactly as you saw it, and the parties to the interview would speak freely, believing themselves free from listeners, but, the moment the curtain was allowed to fall, the door of this recess could be opened, and those within it could overhear anything they wished."

Zeke watched the speaker curiously.

"What does all this herald?" he asked.

"An interview!"

"Between whom?"

"Persons well known to you."

"When?"

"To-night—an hour hence."

The Hotspur found his suspicions increasing, and sternly asked:

"Why do you tell this to me?"

"I want you to overhear the interview."

"I decline!"

"Why?"

"I have no desire to pry into any person's affairs, or to act the spy. I am willing to let others manage their own business, and to attend strictly to my own!"

The Far-Seer quickly advanced, laid her hand on his arm and looked into his face with an earnest gaze.

"I understand your scruples, and honor you for them, but there are times when we must yield to the demands of reason, however strongly it runs counter to our taste."

"Who are the persons that are to hold an interview here?"

"I cannot tell you, but you will know them. Believe me, you will not lower your high standard of manhood by remaining, and what you hear may be of vast value to you—and to others—in the future."

Ralston did not answer. He regarded the woman with close and pertinacious curiosity. She was a beautiful mystery, and he could not fathom her. Every impulse of his nature warned him against trusting her. True, she appeared to be frank and friendly, but she bore that undefinable stamp of beauty run wild and wicked which is so perceptible to experienced eyes. He asked himself what scheme was afoot, but found no answer. She had not yet shown her hand. He did not know who was menaced.

He meditated. If an attack upon himself was intended, he felt able to take care of both life and liberty. If an attack upon another was planned, would it not be better to penetrate the game, while the chance was offered, than to decline stubbornly?

His decision was soon made.

"My appetite for mysteries is not strong," he calmly observed, "but I have always been anxious to improve my mind since my first day at school. I am at your disposal!"

His hand was near his pocket, and he pressed it against a concealed revolver with a sense of satisfaction.

He was ready for friend or foe.

Madame Mystery smiled graciously.

"I was sure you would be willing to please me," she returned, looking at him tenderly.

"My first concern is for Zeke Ralston, but if it won't put me out of my way, I shall be glad to please you also."

It was a matter-of-fact, unpromising remark, but Spitfire Nell would not take it amiss. She continued to smile upon her guest, and was as warm and friendly as he was cold and grim.

CHAPTER XVII.

SPREADING THE ALARM.

HALF an hour passed.

This was a period of time on which Spitfire Nell had counted with eager longing, and she did not fail to improve it. For years she had been an adventuress, and nothing creditable could be said of her. Even the good looks given her by Nature had been used to further her selfish ends—her crimes.

Now she had loved Ralston, as much as one of her nature could. Heaven knows, it was enough of the kind, but the kind was very poor. It was as warm as the prairie fire, and about as scorching and destructive. It did not awaken within her any desire for a better life. If she could win the man of her choice, she was ready for any kind of a life. If she had analyzed her

emotions, and her nature, she would probably have decided that her liking for him would endure longer if spiced with crime than if confined to quiet scenes.

She had set the half-hour apart to impress him, and all her beauty, her grace, her brilliancy of speech were summoned to aid the work.

When the time was past she could not flatter herself that the citadel had capitulated.

Still she did not despair. The great battles of the world had not been decided in thirty minutes; this female warrior on Cupid's field could not expect to win at the first assault. She was disappointed, but she determined to persist.

All the while she had an eye to the clock, and she finally announced that it was time to retire to their hiding-place. They went to the closet, dropped the curtain and waited.

Ten minutes passed; then the hall door was opened. Cerberus appeared. He looked around critically, and then retired. His absence was but temporary; he returned accompanied by a man who was a stranger to Zeke.

"Sit down and wait," Cerberus directed.

"All alone, am I?" asked the stranger.

"Yes."

"Then I'll have a smoke."

The speaker proceeded to light a cigar and make himself at home. He was a middle-aged man with exceedingly dark complexion. His hair was very black, and where his face had been subject to a razor—he wore only a short line of whiskers by each ear—the surface looked purple of color.

There was another lull, and then footsteps again sounded in the hall. Cerberus re-appeared with a second man in tow, and Zeke experienced his first surprise. The new-comer was Eliphalet Hodge!

The Gold Monarch entered with perceptible uneasiness, if not with timidity and fear. Whatever emotion moved him, he seemed to find no pleasure in his occupation. He paused near the threshold, gazed at the previous occupant of the room, and acted as though he wanted to beat a retreat.

"Mr. Eliphalet Hodge, Mr. Daniel Hawks!" announced Cerberus, in a distinct voice; and then he bowed politely, withdrew and closed the door.

The dark stranger quickly arose and went forward with extended hand.

"My dear sir, I am glad to meet you," he announced. "I am a stranger around here, but I have heard your name more than that of any other person, and always with accompanying respect."

"I'm glad to see any one in the mining business," Old Humility replied, "but I can't say that I like yer quarters. Ain't there a fortune-teller erbout hyar?"

"I think I saw some such sign at the outside door, but have had no time to make the acquaintance of my neighbors. As for fortune-tellers, I don't believe in such nonsense."

"Wal, I'm glad you don't know her!" Eliphalet declared, with an air of relief.

"I don't care to. Well, Mr. Hodge, I thank you for coming so promptly, and now, shall we proceed to business?"

"Ef ye please, for time is goin' on. So you're a rich miner? Whar've you owned mines afore?"

"Mr. Hodge, I must confess to a slight deceit," said Hawks, smiling. "I am not here to buy a mine, but on very different business. I wished this interview to be perfectly secret, and wrote you that I wanted to buy a mine simply because I didn't want to run the risk of giving my secret to Tom, Dick and Harry."

"Then what in the land be you?"

"A detective!"

Wyoming Zeke started and turned angrily to Nell.

"What does this mean?" he demanded. "You have decoyed Hodge here under a false pretense! What infamous plot have you in view?"

"None, none!" she hastily answered. "In Heaven's name, be calm! I assure you that no harm is intended."

"Harm is intended, and I shall warn him!"

He made a forward step, but she caught his arm.

"Wait!" she urged. "Do nothing rash. If you see that any undue advantage is taken of him, you are at liberty to interfere. Why should Hodge fear a detective?"

True, why should he? If there was a man living who had no reason for such fear, it was honest Old Humility.

So thought Ralston, and the suspicions that had been aroused by Hawks's confession of duplicity received a check. He turned toward the outer room and looked past the curtain with more composure.

If he could have seen Old Humility's face he would not have been quieted so easily. The moment that Hawks made his statement Eliphalet had been panic-stricken. The word "detective" appeared to have some terrible meaning to his mind. His jaw fell; his face changed color; and he looked at his companion in utter dismay.

Hawks was busy with his cigar, and looking the other way. He talked on glibly:

"I have come to Honeysuckle on important

business, and that's why I asked you to come here, instead of going to your house. It was to preserve secrecy. Nobody but you must know that I am a detective, and I don't want to be seen too much in your company, lest it should arouse suspicion. I don't want help in my work, except what you will kindly give. As you are the leading man of the town, I know you're all right."

"Of course!"

Old Humility agreed to the statement with perceptible eagerness, but his voice had a strange sound.

"I've come to arrest one of your men!"

"One o' my men?" repeated Hodge, more briskly.

"Yes."

"Who is he?"

"Just what I want to know. I am on a blind trail. I was told that if I came to Honeysuckle I should be met by a man who would show me my game. He has not turned up, so I appeal to you."

"Can't ye arrest him alone?"

"I say that I don't know who he is. Of course he is sailing under a false name, for his crime is murder! The deed is over twenty years old, but Justice has at last got on his track. The murderer's name is Cyrus Bunker. Ever hear of him?"

There was a long silence, during which Old Humility was supposed to be making an effort to place the man, but he did not speak until Hawks repeated the question:

"Ever hear of him?"

"Never!" huskily answered the Gold Monarch.

"I thought not. Probably he changed his name right after killing Percival Drew."

Drew! Where had Wyoming Zeke heard that name before, of late?

He was at loss for only a moment. He knew where he had heard it, but the name was Redmond Drew, not Percival.

"I never saw the man," pursued the detective; "there is no picture of him in existence, to my knowledge; and the only description of him is a generation old. You will see that it will be no easy job to recognize him; men change a good deal in twenty odd years. My chief hope is that my unknown correspondent will show up and point Bunker out to me."

"I don't believe he's in Honeysuckle, sir," observed the Gold Monarch, in a voice almost inaudible.

"Why do you think that?"

"Why?" asked Hodge, with a start. "Oh! because—that is, I don't know on him."

"Somehow, I feel that I have the straight tip, and shall find him here. You couldn't use the pick as you did once, Mr. Hodge?"

"Why not?"

"Your hands shake like a leaf. At your age one begins to feel a break-down, and the tremor of your hands shows that your day as a laborer is past. That isn't to the point, however. I'll give you an outline of my case, and you can see how it looks to you, but mind you, I don't want you to spread the story."

"I won't," Eliphalet agreed.

"It might get to the ears of Percival Drew's murderer, you know."

"True!"

Old Humility spoke in a mechanical way, and his voice was hollow. Zeke Ralston knew that he was dismayed and suffering, and wondered that Hawks did not notice the fact. There was a good deal of mystery about the matter, and Zeke did not know what to do. Being at a loss he did the best thing to be done—kept his peace and listened.

If he played the spy, it was not with any unworthy motive.

Madame Mystery improved her opportunity. Under the pretense of preventing him from yielding to an impulse, and rushing out of their covert, she had taken hold of his arm with both hands, and she now stood close to him and her regal head almost rested on his shoulder. Her face was so near his own that, had he been critical, he might have felt her breath on his cheek, but he was wholly indifferent to—almost unconscious of her clinging mood.

He thought only of the scene beyond them; saw only that.

One hand, however, had wandered to the pocket where rested his revolver, and, if Eliphalet Hodge became involved in danger, he would find a good friend near to help him.

As for Hawks, the Hotspur doubted both his honesty and his claim to be a detective.

"Let me light another cigar," continued the man-hunter, "and then I'll give you the story of Cyrus Bunker's cowardly deed of murder!"

CHAPTER XVIII.

HAS CRIME BEEN COVERED WITH CRIME?

THE detective lighted his cigar. Three pairs of eyes watched him with singular interest. The pause was so ominous that trifles had weight. He was provokingly slow, but it was done at last. He blew out a cloud of smoke with perfect content.

"The Drew family was never lucky," he remarked. "Percival Drew was murdered, and he had a son, Redmond, who was ruined by a

woman. The boy was a worthy young fellow, report says, but he fell into evil company. He was arrested on charge of blowing up a building with dynamite, kept prisoner a long while, and when released, was a man broken in health and spirit. He came West, and was heard of no more; perhaps he is dead. It was an ill-starred family, and it would be just Drew luck if he never had Christian burial.

Hawks spoke musingly, and paused again to enliven his cigar.

Little did he suspect what dismay he had caused to one of his secret hearers.

When Eben Wilberley had briefly referred to scenes which he would not enlarge upon, he had told the story of a Redmond Drew which, as far as it went, exactly coincided with the alleged facts concerning Benjamin Plymouth. Now, Daniel Hawks had spoken in like manner of a Redmond Drew.

If all allegations were true, it was a fact that the man's bones had never had Christian burial.

Worse than this, Hawks, when he asserted that Drew had been "ruined by a woman," had added weight to the evidence against Lorraine.

Zeke Ralston bitterly repented having ever come to the fortune-teller's house.

"However," added the unconscious detective, "it is not of him, but of his father, Percival Drew, that I have to speak. The old man was murdered; the guilty person was arrested and sentenced to prison for life; but, with several other convicts, he broke jail and was not retaken. At the time of his sentence it was thought that there were some extenuating circumstances, which fact accounts for his light sentence, but recent developments show that it was a most brutal crime, and he should have had the full rigor of the law!"

"Mebbe his mind has punished him more nor the law could do," answered Old Humility, in a low voice.

"Do you think a murderer has a conscience?"

"Some hev—leastways, some accused folks hev."

"I doubt it."

"Mebbe you don't know what 'tis ter be in endless dread; ter fear the tech of ev'ry man's hand; ter see a detective in ev'ry bush?"

There seemed to be pain and pathos in the Gold Monarch's voice, but Hawks made an impatient gesture.

"I've heard of your honest nature and big heart, Mr. Hodge," he answered, "but that only proves that you are not the man to judge criminals. Now, I've been in the detective business many a long year, and I know the class I have to nab. There's no good in them. A criminal loses all sense of honor, remorse and decency; he is a human wolf, and should be dealt with as such. My long experience has fashioned me so that I can read human nature like a book. Show me a man's face, and I'll tell you just what his character is. Now, if you won't accuse me of flattery, I'll say that one look at you is enough to prove to me that you are a man of unblemished honor. I know honest men, and criminals, but you—why, man, what do you know about law-breakers, their fears, their remorse or their repentance?"

Hawks laughed at the absurdity of the idea, and dogmatically added:

"No more than a child does!"

Old Humility moved uneasily.

"I don't care fur exper'unce."

"Naturally."

"Why do you think this man—this—"

"Cyrus Bunker."

"Yes; why do you think he's in Honeysuckle?"

"I received a letter to that effect, and the writer said he'd show Bunker to me if I'd come on."

"Who writ it?"

"Twas anonymous."

"Do honest men write so?"

"A good point, but we have to use rogues, as well as decent folks, to help us."

"Ef he was sincere, why wa'n't he around ter meet ye, as he said he would?"

"He may show up, yet."

Eliphalet moved uneasily.

"I'm o' the opinion you've been took in, sir," he announced.

"Possibly, but I'll give the case a good trial. I want to catch Bunker. He was a big, overgrown, awkward fellow, and regarded as too good and simple to hurt a cat. Dangerous men, that sort of criminals."

"Be you sure he meant ter—ter kill Drew?"

"Of course."

"Was he seen ter do it?"

"No."

"Then he may be innocent."

"Mr. Hodge, excuse me, but I know more about this case than you do. Why, I can almost follow, in imagination, the workings of the scoundrel's mind before the deed while you don't even know the particulars. Shall I give you all the details?"

"No, no!" cried the Gold Monarch, with a start. "I don't keer ter hear it. I—my time is brief, an' I'd rather not hear the story."

"All right. Now, you say you don't know Bunker?"

"Never hev heard the name in the West until you spoke it. He may be dead."

"Never mind, Mr. Hodge; let me form the theories. I think he is alive, and in Honeysuckle. I suppose you are ready to help me run him down?"

"If Yes, yes; sartain, sartain!"

"All right. I want you to consider every man in the camp, think over what you know of him, weigh his character and see what you can make out of him. He may be playing the goody-goody part, but is probably a disreputable wretch."

"Prob'ly."

"I infer that he must be a heavy man; perhaps about your size, and about your age!"

"I'll hev my eyes open," Eliphalet promised, with another uneasy motion.

"Thank you; I shall feel grateful for any aid you give me. Now, I only hired this room for the evening, wishing to make our interview wholly private, and to arrive at an understanding before I appeared in public. This is done, and henceforth I shall be at the hotel, where I have engaged a room. I shall stay there and keep up the pretense of being interested in mines, and when we meet let our talk be in that vein. See?"

"Yes."

"I have a key to my room at the hotel, and have discovered that a key which I already possessed will fit the door as well as that which the landlord gave me. Now, I desire you to accept one of the keys and keep it, so that you can enter my room at any hour of the day or night. If at any time you get a clew of any value whatever, please come to the hotel, and, if my door is locked, quietly open it and enter. Do you agree?"

The speaker laid a brass key on the table in front of the Gold Monarch. The latter gazed at it without making any movement. His face was so much in the shadow that Hawks could not see him distinctly, and had no clew to his thoughts or to the motive of his silence.

"Do not hesitate," added the detective. "There are few strangers whom I would trust thus, for a detective's life is always in danger; but your reputation is a sufficient guarantee that you are all right."

"I s'pose I kin take it," Hodge agreed, in slow, peculiar accents.

"Do so, if you please."

The Gold Monarch took the key.

"Now," proceeded Hawks, rising, "we may as well adjourn. I want to get to bed and have a good night's rest. As I wish to keep up the veil of secrecy we will separate at the outside door of this house—or you may not be ready to go?"

"Oh, yes—yes, I'm ready!"

Old Humility rose hurriedly, and then both left the room, while the detective continued to talk freely.

Madame Mystery turned to Zeke Ralston.

"You have heard," she tersely observed.

"Yes."

"But not as much as I thought you would. I confess that I am disappointed; there has been no such revelation as I expected."

Zeke was looking away from her, and his forehead was knit in a thoughtful, troubled scowl.

"What did you expect?" he asked.

"Some things which I know; some which I do not know."

"What are they?"

"I do not feel it my duty, or right, to tell."

"Then why did you bring me here?"

"Because I thought you would hear something of interest to you."

"Why should I be interested?"

The Hotspur had shifted his gaze and was regarding her sternly, but she did not waver.

"Are you unwilling to know what will soon be public news?"

"The affairs of others concern me but little. Did the detective know we were listening?"

"No."

"Then you have played him false?"

"With a good object."

Ralston shrugged his shoulders skeptically.

"Don't be too critical," Spitfire Nell added, gently. "Judge not, lest ye be judged. I assure you that my motives were of the best. You and I are, I presume, willing to let Mr. Daniel Hawks search, though I doubt his ability to succeed. That part is not material. Later, perhaps, the case of the Drews, Percival and Redmond, father and son, may prove of interest to us."

"Why should they?" Zeke curtly asked.

Nell's beautiful face grew cold and hard, and an unpleasant gleam appeared in her eyes.

"I will show you, some day!" she responded, in a voice not agreeable to hear.

"Why not now?"

"Impossible!"

"Please recall that verdict. You know the history of the Drews. Will you tell it to me?"

CHAPTER XIX.

A MAN STRANGELY MISSING.

HALF an hour later Zeke Ralston reproached himself for asking the question last recorded. He felt that Madame Mystery was Lorraine Wilberley's enemy, and would speak no good of her. Whatever might be the facts in the case

of Redmond Drew alias Benjamin Plymouth—if, indeed, the two had been one and the same person—Nell was not the woman to exonerate her rival.

Her rival? Yes; the Hotspur would have been blind had he failed to see that the Far-Seer was making love to him desperately. Report, too, had connected his name with that of Miss Wilberley, as lovers, and Nell must have heard it.

And this was clear to him when he had time to meditate calmly, but, just then, he thought only of getting the truth concerning the Drews. If Lorraine could be cleared, the ways and means were not of consequence.

Nell's hard face softened; she turned, put her hand upon his shoulder and looked tenderly and pathetically into his face.

"Mr. Ralston, I am very reluctant to disappoint you," she replied, in her gentlest voice, "but there are times when we cannot do as we would be glad to. Your question is natural, and I would like to help you, but my own knowledge is limited—somewhat—while as for what I do know, it would be cruel to divulge it. I should thereby strike a sister-woman, and be the cause of great misery to her."

It was well said, and once more her breath softly swept his cheek, but he was not impressed in the least. He kept his position with phlegmatic indifference which, really, was quite as aggravating to her as a rebuff would have been.

"Who is this lady?" he asked.

"Excuse me, but I cannot give her name."

"Is she in Honeysuckle?"

"Don't ask me! I cannot say anything to wound her."

Zeke's lip curled scornfully. He knew that she was acting the hypocrite.

"Well, you asked me here to overhear something which you were anxious I should know. I have failed to learn it. What are we going to do about it?"

"I see but one way."

"And that?"

"Is to delay. Let us drop the subject for now, Mr. Ralston. The future may bring developments, but I cannot tell more now."

"Very well. I am willing to wait for what the tide of time brings. And now I'll leave you."

"Why need you hurry?" Nell hospitably asked.

"I need sleep. Age, Madame Mystery, is telling upon me, and I cannot lose sleep like a young man and not feel the consequences sorely!"

Nell saw fit to be greatly amused by this grim remark of the athletic young borderer, and she made a laughing reply. She was too shrewd to urge him to remain longer, and he bade her good-night courteously and left the house.

Once outside he looked back with a scornful curl of his lips.

"Does the woman think me a fool, or does she want me to think her one? She is as transparent as glass. All this has been aimed at Lorraine, whom she hates and would crush. It's a safe wager that she is an ally of Norris Dayton, and knows that he has told me the story of Benjamin Plymouth."

He walked on in deep thought. He could not be blind to the fact that danger was hovering over his friends like a coming tempest, and as he was not in the confidence of either party, and such confidence was refused him, he could not use his strongest endeavors to baffle the enemy.

Nevertheless, he determined to watch over Lorraine, and be her protector, while there was a shadow of hope.

"But what of Old Humility?" he mentally asked.

There he was at fault. He knew that the interview just past had been most painful to Mr. Hodge, and wondered that Hawks had not observed it, but there had been a great difference in his position and that of the detective.

He had been prepared for doubts and suspicions; Hawks had sat down with the impression that he could talk with perfect freedom to the Gold Monarch, a man reputed to be the personification of honor.

Hodge had been agitated by mention of Percival Drew; the latter had left a son named Redmond, and Redmond was believed to be Benjamin Plymouth. How did the two cases connect? Had one grown out of the other? Did that of the elder Drew menace Mr. Hodge as that of the younger did Lorraine?

Questions like these occupied the Hotspur's mind as he walked toward the hotel. He had expected to get another look at the detective, but was disappointed; the man had already retired to his room. Upon the register, however, was the record, "D. Hawks, Griggins, Montana," and it showed that he meant to keep himself shady. Zeke did not believe there was any town or camp in Montana named "Griggins."

Satisfied that Hawks would not reappear that night he, too, promptly retired.

The hours of darkness passed; another day dawned.

Zeke arose early. He wanted to see the detective and observe how he would open the day, and felt capable of watching him quietly for

awhile without betraying himself. He sat down near the desk and waited for Hawks. An hour—two hours passed.

This was late for people to rise in busy Honeysuckle, but Ralston was patient. He waited another hour.

By that time some one else had grown impatient. The chambermaid's work was checked by Hawks's locked door, and she came to the clerk with a complaint.

"Knock on the dock," he suggested.

"I have, but thar wa'n't no answer."

"Then hammer on it!"

Equipped with this permission the girl went away, but returned at the end of ten minutes.

"I've about knocked the door down," she announced, "but not a sound is there inside. He don't answer, and I don't hear any stir."

"He's paid his bill, and I don't see why he should skip," remarked the clerk, scratching his chin, "but I'll take a look inside."

He took the extra key and went up-stairs. Wyoming Zeke awaited the result with interest, and this feeling did not abate when the clerk came back with quick steps and a manner of considerable excitement.

"See here, Ralston!" he exclaimed, "I wish you would go up there with me. The dickens seems to pay!"

"What's the trouble?"

"The man is gone, and— But come and see!"

Zeke was not reluctant, and they were soon on the scene. They entered the detective's room, and the Hotspur swept a quick glance around. No other person was in the apartment, though the chambermaid was hovering in the hall, as though unwilling to come nearer. The bed was rumpled, and, plainly, had been occupied, but Hawks was not there.

The clerk moved forward and pointed with a finger not wholly steady.

"What do you make of that?" he demanded.

Ralston did not need to ask for an explanation. One of the pillows, and the sheet below, was smeared with a red stain, the nature of which he did not need to ask.

"Gone, and left only that sign!" the clerk added.

Zeke's gaze sought his companion's face.

"What do you make of it?" he asked.

"Look closer! Do you see that?"

It was a short, clean cut in the sheet, as though done with a keen-edged knife.

"I see," Zeke agreed, "and these things seem to have a voice of their own."

"What does that voice say?"

"I'll leave you to decide."

"Does it say—foul play?"

The clerk was excited, but he kept his emotions in check by a strong effort. He had not been many months from the East, and had not the nerve which he would possess after a few years' experience with rough life.

"There is no sign of a struggle," Zeke answered.

"If a murderer gets in one good blow, there never is a struggle."

"Come, Lane, you represent the house while the landlord is away. Don't be hasty!"

The clerk examined the windows; both were fastened.

"I don't see how any one could get in," he explained. "Certainly, it was not by these avenues. Only the door remains. Hawks had one key; the second was locked into the chambermaid's room with her. The lock does not seem to have been tampered with, and there was no third key!"

Ralston was silent; he was too startled to reply. These remarks recalled the fact that Hawks had given Eliphalet Hodge a key which, he asserted, would enable the Gold Monarch to enter the room at any time.

The young man looked at the red stains, and the knife-cut, and shivered. Possibilities were suggested which gave him a creeping of the flesh.

"It looks," resumed the clerk, "as though some enemy had entered here and assaulted Hawks while he slept. If he was overcome, it would not be hard to carry the body down and out, if there were men enough to do it. No one is on guard at the office after two o'clock, and the outside door is not locked. Yes; it would be easy to carry a body out, but how in the deuce could an enemy enter this room?"

The inquiry was natural, but Zeke offered no explanation. He wished that he had never seen that key given to Eliphalet Hodge!

"Don't leap to conclusions," he advised.

"Hawks may have had a nose-bleed."

"If that is so, where is he now? And how do you account for the cut in the sheet?"

Ralston was silent.

"Looks to me like a murder!" the clerk added, with emphasis, after a pause.

Before Zeke could give more advice, the proprietor of the hotel arrived. He was a man seasoned by many years' experience in the wild parts of the West, and he promptly sat down upon all of the clerk's theories. The missing guest had been taken with a bleeding at the nose, and had gone out for air. Murdered? Nonsense! He would soon return, safe and sound.

This was a cheerful, optimistic view of the

case, and he made Ralston and the clerk feel more comfortable, but his reputation as a prophet gradually waned.

Daniel Hawks did not come back!

CHAPTER XX.

DEAF DRAKE AND POLLY.

TEN days subsequent to the discovery in the hotel chamber, Wyoming Zeke and Childeric Hall left Honeysuckle on horseback and rode toward the rival town of Cottoncliff. At the point where they could gain the last look of the town of their adoption, the schoolmaster turned and improved the chance.

"You don't look, Zeke," he observed.

"I don't care to."

"But we may never see Honeysuckle again."

"Honeysuckle can stand it, and so can I."

"Nonsense, Zeke! why are you in such low spirits? Do you anticipate failure?"

"I expect that the men of Cottoncliff will refuse to compromise, but that does not worry me. I shall do my level best for Eliphalet Hodge's sake, but I don't care a cent personally. I shall soon leave for Texas, and then the fortunes of Honeysuckle will interest me only as it brings good luck or bad to my friends."

"I'm sorry to see you in such a mood."

"What's the trouble with my mood?" Zeke asked curtly.

"Since Lorraine Wilberley left, it has been decidedly cranky. There!—pardon me, Ralston; I meant no harm."

"None is done," was the steady reply. "It is true that Lorraine refused to marry me before she left, but I am not mourning my life away. Hardly! Broken hearts may do for flats, but I have no such article in my possession. I dare say I've been cranky of late; I've felt that way, certainly; but not all on my own account. I think more of Lorraine than of myself."

"Probably you have cause for it."

"I have, for she is in trouble. She told me that, when she and her uncle left Honeysuckle, we must part forever, but it was said with a tremulous voice and a quivering lip. I was a discarded suitor, but I felt only pity for her."

"You may yet meet again."

"Eben Wilberley stated that they should at once leave this Territory."

"If you go to Texas, you may meet there."

"I go that way because I think they will not go there."

"Perhaps you will find Daniel Hawks," suggested Hall, more lightly.

Zeke gave his friend a glance, but did not reply.

"It is odd what became of Hawks," Hall more gravely added. "If we assume that he is alive and well, we must confess that it's rather queer for a man to go to a hotel, stay half a night, and then disappear, leaving all his baggage behind him. If we assume that our man met with foul play, we must credit somebody with a very neat job. Do you think he will ever be heard from?"

"No," Zeke replied.

"Why not?"

"Missing men, who leave blood-stains behind them, are not usually heard from."

"It's very strange!"

Ralston did not reply. He was not naturally of a communicative nature, and, though he confided a good deal to Hall, he had never told him about the key which Hawks gave Eliphalet Hodge. During the days which had passed without bringing any tidings of the missing detective, this circumstance had grown more significant. With that key, Hawks had told Old Humility he could enter the room at any hour of the day or night; and all Honeysuckle had decided that some one had entered the room and slain Hawks.

Zeke had never spoken of the key, nor had Madame Mystery, nor had Hodge. Nobody else knew of it.

The Hotspur had thought that the Gold Monarch would come forward and tell all he knew, but he told nothing. At his bidding a search was made around the camp, but nothing was found of the missing man.

A letter addressed to the place from whence Hawks registered—Griggins, Montana—had come back with the information that no such place was known. No one appeared to inquire for the lost man, and the case bade fair to be a profound, lasting mystery.

Ralston never heard this assertion made without thinking of Madame Mystery. What if she came forward and told of the key? At the very least, people would ask Hodge why he had never referred to it. In that case, what would be answer?

Thus far, the fortune-teller had made no sign.

Eben Wilberley and Lorraine had left Honeysuckle and were supposed to be miles away. Zeke had asked the girl to marry him, and had been refused. He never expected to see her again.

There had been a very quiet interval at the camp. Boylston and Dayton had not been seen. No one had been troubled by them, and no one, unless it was Madame Mystery, knew where they were. They were not among the persons from whom Zeke never expected to hear again.

Sooner or later, he felt sure, they would reappear upon the scene, as full of mischief as ever.

Old Humility had been acting like himself, except, at times, when he fell into thought and did not seem to find meditation agreeable. He was as attentive to others as ever. He found time to bestow some money in charity, and to do a good many acts of kindness.

The county-seat question had slumbered, but the date of the second meeting was drawing near, and he had formed a plan of compromise and started Ralston and Hall toward Cottoncliff, as has been seen, to convey his terms.

Such was the situation on the day when the young men were riding through the mountains.

Their progress was slow. Rapid riding would have been out of the question, in any case, and they were in no haste. When the sun drew near the western horizon they were in the wildest part of the mountains.

"We shall have a big bedroom for to-night," remarked Hall, looking at the wild scenery, "and yonder peaks will be our sentinels."

"Unfortunately, they always sleep on their post."

"It don't matter, for we shall be safe enough. I don't suppose there is another man within ten miles of us."

"Then we shall have good neighbors."

Their comforting anticipations were interrupted by the sight of a man who was certainly within ten miles of them; he was within ten rods. They reached a curve in the cliff-lined trail, and, as they bore around, saw another horseman. He and his quadruped were alike quite the reverse of agreeable to look upon; the man was shockingly ragged, and the horse only a collection of bones. The latter was limping painfully, and appeared to be at the fag-end of life.

"A scarecrow on a skeleton," Hall observed.

"An old friend of yours, however," Zeke answered.

"Of mine? Zounds! it's Deaf Drake, as sure as you live. This is a happy reunion!"

A grimace cast some doubt on his sincerity, but, as Drake drew up to let his horse drink, they rapidly closed the gap. Eli was among the persons who had disappeared from Honeysuckle, some days previously, but no one had thought of searching for him.

Ralston was rather glad to see the man of rags, and cheerfully hailed him, as he showed no signs of having seen them.

"Hollo, friend Drake!"

"Drink hearty, Polly, old gal!" quoth Eli, in his well-remembered husky whisper, without turning his head.

"Hollo, there!"

"Water's fattenin', they say," the old man went on, "an' I a'prove on't when took in'ardly, but it's mighty bad fur the outsides."

Zeke pitched his voice several keys higher, and desperately shouted:

"Say, Eli—are you there?"

"What's that?" cried Drake, not yet turning his head. "Did you speak, Polly? Ain't you got shiny hair? Wal, wal! That's the fu'st time I ever heerd a boss talk! But you're like all yer sex, Polly, an' is full o' vanity. Wal, I s'pose you hev got shiny hair!"

Despairing of making himself heard in any ordinary way, Zeke had drawn his lariat, and he now lassoed the man of hard hearing. Eli turned calmly, and his face brightened.

"Hands up!" Ralston commanded.

"What! be you thar? Must hev sneaked up soft as cats, fur I never heerd ye," Drake affirmed, in his most innocent way, and without heeding the noose around his neck.

"Hands up, you vagabond!" Wyoming Zeke repeated. "We have caught you at last!"

Eli's hands were up, but he acted as though the matter was one of common occurrence, and the usual way of being met by a friend.

"Yes, you come up mighty soft an' keerful," he asserted.

"You heard us coming."

"Is my mare good at runnin'? Wal, she jest is, or at canterin', or walkin', or anything else. A mighty good mare she is; thirteen year old, an' goin' on twelve!"

"No room to doubt these facts," laughed Hall.

"What do I tax?" huskily whispered the vagabond, whose ears seemed to be at their worst. "Thank ye, but Polly ain't fur sale."

"Wouldn't you take fifty dollars?"

"No, sir! It would be sacrilegious ter sell at that figger. Nothin' short o' forty dollars will buy her, an' she ain't fur sale, noways."

"Now, Drake—"

"Polly ain't fur sale; couldn't think o' takin' it. She's a most uncommon boss. What's did it? Why, the Royal Egyptian Ointment! You'd ought ter seen that mare when I got her. She was so run down that, when she tried ter scratch her nose with her hind hoof, she fell down and run her leg down her own throat up ter the stiffl-j'int. That's the way I found her. I gi'n her a bottle o' the Ointment, an' she threw up her leg. She was starvin' poor, an' I took ter usin' it on her out'ardly, an' in between several days she grew as plump an' slick as a three-year-old!"

"That will do, friend Drake," announced Zeke, lowering his voice somewhat. "I've told you before that deafness is a sham, and I say so now. Where've you been?"

"Be'n all 'round, an' sold tons o' the Ointment. Folks laughed at my clo'se, an' libeled me by sayin' I was deaf; but they knowed my Egyptian remedy was good fur burns, boils, bruises, an' bunions, an' they disbursed the doubloons permiscu'ss."

"Have you any news?"

"Not a thing, pardners. Hev you?"

"Nothing. Do you go our way?"

"Yes, yes; wait an artom, an' I'll be erlong. Whoa, Polly! Stan' still an' lemme git my leg over yer spine. I've got a rheumatikel ketch in the fiddlebus bone. Legs, ye know, is discomposed o' two bones—the fiddlebus, an' the troubleus."

"I presume you refer to the *tibia* and the *fibula*," answered Hall.

"Them's the names in English, but my way is the Latin form. Means the same thing. Git up, Polly! Gee off, an' pick up yer shrunk shanks playful-like."

With slow and difficult movements, the old vagabond had swung himself upon Polly's back, and the journey was resumed.

Deaf Drake was in a loquacious mood, and talked almost constantly. His hearing was as erratic as ever. At times he had no difficulty in understanding; then he would make some absurd mistake, getting the sound, but not the sense, of the last word, in the old way.

Polly, the mare, too, developed queer qualities.

For a bony horse she unquestionably had remarkable strength, but she was eccentric. She was lame, and the lameness was original in its way. It shifted from leg to leg, and was liable to be in any of the four, or to change from one to the other at any time.

Eli explained this by saying that it was a device of the mare's to rest herself, and as he was her owner he was not disputed, but it looked as though every limp was produced by great pain.

The queer couple made a welcome addition to the party, and furnished amusement for a journey, which would otherwise have been lonely.

Darkness quickly followed the setting of the sun, and the travelers selected a camping-place, made a fire, and sat down to pass the evening the best they could.

CHAPTER XXI.

HALL GETS INTO TROUBLE.

THE fire burned low, and silence and slumber prevailed in the camp. Ralston and Hall, wrapped in their blankets, were unconscious of all things worldly. The horses, perhaps, dreamed of a better land for their kind. Deaf Drake was not visible, but as he had crawled under a ledge when he lay down to rest, he was liable to be there still.

At that time the fire threw its light only far enough to make a small circle distinct. Beyond all was dark.

There was a wavering of a black shadow at the point where light and shade met. At first it might have seemed to be a bush shaken by the wind, but no breeze was stirring, and it soon developed peculiarities not common to bushes.

It advanced; it hesitated and remained stationary; it put forward members like the paws of an animal; it raised itself higher than before; it advanced further into the light and revealed the head and form of a man.

He was spying on the camp, and the face he thrust into the fire-light did not serve as a recommendation; it was a coarse, brutal face, framed with shaggy locks of hair.

If he was a friend, his actions belied him.

Long and carefully he looked at the sleepers, and then turning, made a gesture. It appeared to be one of warning to persons invisible. This done, he dropped upon his hands and knees and began to creep toward Zeke and Hall with all possible caution.

Again there was a tremulous motion to the dark line behind the creeper. Other shadows wavered like wind rustled bushes—advanced—took the form of men—paused near the neutral line and watched their leader.

There was danger for the travelers, but they slept on unconscious of it.

The creeper showed great skill, and not a sound betrayed his advance. He had transferred a knife from his belt to his teeth, but it was for defense, rather than attack. He did not intend to strike just then unless his own life was placed in jeopardy. What he wanted was to secure the sleepers' weapons quietly, and render them defenseless.

So he crawled on, looking first at the coveted weapons and then at the faces of the men, and his coarse face was full of eagerness and cunning.

Nearer, nearer yet, until only a few feet separated him from Zeke and Hall.

Then came an interruption: a small Bedlam, with the mare Polly as the demon thereof. Perhaps the gaunt quadruped had bad dreams, or a pain of the stomach—in any case, she sud-

denly emitted a most blood-curdling squeal, and then, backing down toward the center of the camp, began to kick at vacancy with marvelous rapidity and venom; and every time she kicked, she squealed in a maniacal fashion.

Such an interruption would have aroused the soundest sleeper, and Zeke and Hall sprung up as though operated by machinery. They came out of peaceful slumber to find a terrible din in camp, and it was somewhat confusing, but the Hotspur's border experience proved a good friend then. His hand flew to his revolver, and he stood on the defensive.

The creeper saw that secrecy was out of the question, and he uttered a prodigious whoop. Then the dark shadows in the background bounded forward, and the firelight showed them closing in on the campers on all sides.

Zeke swept a glance around and failed to see Deaf Drake, but Hall was by his side.

"Back to back, pard!" hesung out, in a voice remarkable for its cheerful inflection; and the schoolmaster, though not a man of war, obeyed in a praiseworthy fashion.

The assailants set the pace. Their weapons were drawn, and their manner so savage that their purpose was not to be mistaken. Wyoming Zeke opened the skirmish; he covered the shoulder of the late creeper, not caring to end his career if it could be helped, and winged him scientifically with a bullet.

Then the enemy closed in, and it was hand-to-hand, with blow for blow. The assailants yelled discordantly, and Polly would not let her youthful modesty shut her out from the opera. She squealed away as though for life, and kicked yawning gaps in the defenseless air.

If the sagacious mare had turned her hoofs on the enemy she would have cleaned out the camp, but there was a limit to her genius.

But where was her master? If he was still under the ledge he did not make the fact manifest. Deaf Drake was conspicuous by his absence.

The travelers were outnumbered. This was perceptible at the first, and the results were soon seen. Childeric Hall was manly and muscular, but he was not accustomed to such work. His guard was beaten down; the enemy reached his side; he was seized and dragged down; and then Zeke was left to fight alone.

The Hotspur was as cool as ever, and he had been using his eyes and mind, as well as his weapons.

He had discovered that the assailants wished to take them alive, and when Hall was overpowered, he decided upon a change of base.

He could not defeat the enemy, but he believed that he could avoid capture.

The effort was promptly made.

With a ringing shout he went at the men. His muscular arms were swung with beautiful regularity, and each blow was to the purpose. They attacked him in a body, but were given little time to do damage. He had determined to cut his way through, and he went resistlessly. Those who opposed him were toppled over, and he soon cleared the last of them and sprung away into the darkness.

A bullet followed him, and he heard its whistle; then came a perfect volley, but the lead went wild.

The whole West was before him, and he lost no time. Leaping from rock to rock, he receded rapidly. There was pursuit, but no one there was quicker or surer of foot. He found that he could defy them, and soon had the whole gang shaken off.

He paused at the foot of a cliff to regain strength. He was breathing hard, and his arms were not as muscular as they had been. More than that, he was bleeding from several slight wounds, but these he disregarded after a short examination.

There was that on his mind which he regarded as of more importance.

Childeric Hall was a prisoner!

Who were his captors, and why had the attack been made?

Outlawry was not a feature of life around Honeysuckle. A single man might commit crime, as is the fashion in all parts of the world; but road-agents and the like had never been heard of in that region. Who, then, were the present disturbers, and what motive had led to their assault?

Plainly, they had wished to take both Hall and himself alive. Why? This was a question to which no answer suggested itself.

Presently the Hotspur recovered his normal powers, and he lost no time in taking further action. Not for a moment did he think of deserting his friend. He was determined to know what was done with the schoolmaster, and rescue him at the earliest possible moment.

Acting according to this plan he retraced his steps with great care, and was soon within sight of the camp. The strangers had thrown a fresh supply of dry, light wood upon the fire, and the scene was well lighted.

Hall was visible, and, though he bore unpleasant marks of the struggle, did not seem to be seriously injured. Zeke had reached just the right point, for two men came away from where Hall stood, as it proved, to consult. One was no stranger to the Hotspur; he recognized

Perk Tuttle, the vagabond who has before been mentioned casually.

Perk was in ill-humor, and caressing an injured arm, but his companion was attentive only to business.

"Wal, shall we move on?"

"Do as ye durn please!" growled Perk.

"Don't seem no use ter look fur Ralston."

"I'll look fur him, some day! 'Twas him give me this wipe on the crazy-bone!"

"It's a pity we lost him."

"I'd knife him ef he was hyar!"

"No, you wouldn't, you kickin' mule! Drop it! Act the man! What's a pain in yer arm?"

"It's tortur' afore the set time."

"Stop yer squealin' an' attend ter biz. I say, what is yer idee? We've lost Ralston, an' don't stan' no show o' gittin' him back. Hadn't we better take Hall an' skip?"

"I reckon."

"An' the hosses?"

"Bet yer life! We want some gain. Yes; we'll scoop in the animyles, an' then git ter quarters."

"Come on!"

Back they went, and the word was given to prepare for departure. It seemed that the gang had no horses of their own, and they intended to use those so fortunately secured. It was decreed that Hall must walk, and he was secured to the saddle of his own horse with a lariat.

Circumstances had caused them to leave the mare, Polly, until the last. That eccentric animal, after doing all she could to make night hideous when the skirmish was on, had relapsed into silence, and assumed an air as modest as that of the school-girl of tradition.

One of the strangers approached her head with all the innocence and confidence in the world. Repentance came to him immediately after. Polly suddenly swung her nose around; her jaws parted and revealed a yawning chasm between; and then she closed her teeth upon his arm with a vicious snap.

He uttered a roar of pain.

"Help! help!" he yelled. "The devil is killin' me!"

It was a sympathetic crowd, and they moved to his aid. They moved too much. All at once Polly released her hold, uttered a savage squeal, and let fly her heels like a flash.

Unfortunate Perk Tuttle was just where he ought not to have been; the mare's hoofs caught him in the stomach; and he was flung against his companions forcibly. Two of them went down, and Perk landed on top of them.

Polly had eased her mind. She discarded all signs of venom or friskiness, and stood with her head lowered meekly. Her whole manner was a protest against lawless deeds, but it had come too late to suit Perk.

He lay upon the ground, both hands clasped over his stomach, and sent forth some of the most dismal groans ever heard.

Really, he was a lucky man. If his position had been such that he received the full force of Polly's kick, he would not have been in condition to groan. All things considered, he had escaped lightly, but he could not have been induced to believe it.

For some time he could do no more than to groan, but speech gradually returned.

"Kill that hoss!" he roared, with vigor. "I'm a dyin' man! Oh! oh! I kin see the shores o' t'other land, a'ready! Will somebody kill that hoss? It's a fiend—a demon—a devil! Mart Burks, git yer gun an' shoot her. Oh! oh! I'm dyin! I'm dead, but I ain't out o' pain!"

Some of his fellows tried to cheer him, but he would not have it. He held on to his stomach, and groaned and leveled abuse at Polly alternately.

The mare had made her reputation, and no one dared to mount her. She was lassoed with care, and marked down as an animal to be led, rather than ridden.

Perk Tuttle caused considerable delay, but was finally induced to mount one of the horses, and the party started.

Close after them went Wyoming Zeke. He had no intention of deserting Hall. Wherever his friend was taken he would go. So he followed the kidnappers, his mind engaged with several questions.

Who were the men? Why had they made the attack? What had become of Deaf Drake, at the moment he was wanted the most?

CHAPTER XXII.

TALK OF MURDER.

OLD HUMILITY was alone in his office. He had transacted some business, and left other things undone until he could get the help of his aids. He was not at ease with a pen in his hand. His penmanship and spelling were not the worst in the world, but those who had to read what he wrote, thought that they came near being so.

One story, often told in Honeysuckle, was to the effect that when Eliphalet owned his first mine, and engaged his first superintendent, he one day wrote off the details of several business transactions and gave to the new employee.

The superintendent could not decipher the writing, and, after a long study, he went to the

Gold Monarch and confessed the fact. He expected the latter to be angry, and was in great trepidation, but the result was quite unexpected.

Mr. Hodge failed to read his own writing, and had to give it up.

From that time he gave all directions orally, and had some one else write his letters.

On this particular day, having disposed of business, he sat engaged only in thought—wondering if Hall and Ralston would be successful at Cottoncliff.

Some one entered; the Gold Monarch looked up. Then he had a disagreeable surprise.

The new-comer was Madame Mystery.

Old Humility became dismayed, for he feared the woman, but she bowed gracefully and took a seat without an invitation.

"I am glad to find you alone," she observed.

"Yes," he returned in a faint voice.

"I have come on business!"

The remark sounded ominous to him, and he regarded her in troubled silence.

"You, I suppose," she went on, "invariably associate the word 'business' with mines and money-making, but it has a wider significance, as I will show you."

"Perhaps some other time would do as well—"

"No, sir; it would not!"

She made the interruption curtly, and he felt like a fish dangling on the hook.

"Let me ask," she added, "if there is any news of the missing man, Daniel Hawks?"

The blow came swiftly and with force, but the miserable man was prepared for anything. For many days he had felt that an earthquake was yawning for him, and, if it closed, that meant only the ending of misery.

There was a change in his manner, but it was not masked. His hands took on the old trembling; an expression appeared on his face which was pathetic in its despair; but there was nothing more.

"I ain't heard that thar is news," he replied. "Do you suppose he will ever be heard from?"

"I don't know."

"Do you think he is—murdered?"

Spitfire Nell paused, leaned forward, and uttered the last word dramatically. Her eyes studied his face, but she did not see as much as she hoped.

"That's the gin'ral opinion," Hodge replied.

"What is your opinion?"

"I think probable he'll be around ag'in."

"I thought you would say that!"

"Why?"

"Because he is a detective."

"Is he?"

Nell smiled sarcastically. In any case she felt able to wind the simple-minded old man "around her finger," while, as it then was, she knew more than Eliphalet suspected.

"Hawks, if alive, is a detective. I thought you might have learned the fact, somehow."

"I think nobody hyar has found it out."

"Not even yourself?"

"So I said."

"Mr. Hodge, you amuse me!"

He lifted his gaze and regarded her with troubled inquiry. He wanted to be shrewd and deep, but his capacity was about equal to that of a child.

"You talk in riddles," he returned.

"Think I've heard that remark before. But let us speak of Hawks, the detective. He came West to arrest a man—a murderer!"

Old Humility shifted his position in the uneasy way which had marked his manner when Hawks, himself, had him on the rack.

"You don't say so!" he exclaimed.

"Yes, I do, Cyrus Bunker—excuse me; I mean that he came to arrest a man of that name. How absurd of me to call you Cyrus Bunker!"

She laughed in a silvery fashion, but the Gold Monarch could not even answer in a monosyllable. Common sense told him that he was fighting against fate in vain, but he clung to the last hope, as people will.

"Cyrus Bunker was the murderer," continued Madame Mystery. "Many years ago he committed the deed, and then fled to the West. He has passed a score of years in peace and happiness, but justice is on his track. Daniel Hawks came and was murdered, but the law will send other detectives."

"Did you know this when Hawks was bein' looked fur most?"

"Yes."

"But you didn't tell on't?"

"No. Do you know why?"

"No."

"I like a successful scoundrel, and, when I knew that Hawks was dead, I said, 'Score one for Bunker!' and held my peace."

"Then he's really dead?"

"I should smile if he isn't. I haven't seen his remains, but I can understand as easy as you please how he happened to disappear from the room in the hotel, and what became of him. Can't you?"

"No; I can't."

"Come off de rocks! Old man, what has become of the key to his room which Hawks gave you? What did you do with it after you skulked

in there, that night, killed him and then carried out his body? How lucky for you that he gave you the key!"

Old Humility felt the billows of fate beginning to roll over him. He was very pale, and his big hands were weak and trembling. He felt that he was in this woman's power, but he would not surrender.

"What key?" he huskily asked, looking only at the floor.

"Bah! I and another overheard every word that passed between you and Hawks at your interview, and we saw the detective give you the key. The more fool he! When I heard, the next day, how he had disappeared, I knew that the key had been responsible for it. Luck favored you wonderfully, Mr. Eliphalet Hodge, but you must have done the job neatly to get him out of the hotel unseen and unheard."

"I know nothin' about it!"

"No?"

"Not a thing."

"Then who did the job?"

"I don't know."

"Don't lie to me, Old Humility! I'm a rounder, myself, and my eyes are open. Don't try to stuff me!"

Spitfire Nell, at that moment, was a strong contrast to the melodious-voiced, lady-like creature who was trying to win Zeke Ralston's heart. Her real nature was showing—the training she had received in haunts of vice all the way from Connecticut and California. For many years her chosen associates had been thieves and murderers, and she liked them as much as they admired her. She could use the language of a lady, but free-and-easy conversation, with a spice of slang, was the vein most to her taste.

Once more Hodge protested that he did not understand, whereupon she snapped her fingers contemptuously.

"You make me tired!" she asserted. "Can't you see that I am well aware that you are Cyrus Bunker? It was you that killed Percival Drew; that fled to the West and tried the goody-goody dodge; that amassed wealth and raised yourself to a pinnacle of power and outward respectability; that Hawks called upon as the man of all men to help him find Cyrus Bunker—yourself; that put him out of your way as suddenly as he had come into it! 'Old Humility,' indeed! You are named with fine sarcasm—you are twice a murderer!"

The woman's mood had changed. She lost her sarcastic self-possession, and the venom in her nature blazed out fiercely. She spoke rapidly—impetuously—and every word was like a stab. She looked at Hodge with all her deadly enmity revealed, and there was no chance to assume a lack of comprehension after such a bitter, sweeping arraignment.

The Gold Monarch did not cower before her as might have been expected.

He had looked for this accusation, and it was listened to with less dismay than had been produced by the first insinuations, some days before.

He did not look at her, but was ready with denial, as any one would have been under like circumstances.

"Woman, you are crazy!" he declared, with all the firmness he could assume.

"Do you deny that you are Cyrus Bunker?"

"Sartain, I do!"

"Do you know why I came to Honeysuckle?"

"No."

"Because I had tracked you down. Long years I hunted, for your trail was moss-grown with time, but I finally found you. Do you remember that Hawks told you he was brought here by a letter from an unknown, who said Bunker was here, and that he would reveal him if the detective would come on? That unknown was myself. I did call Hawks here, but you neatly trumped my high card. You killed Hawks, and—"

"I did not te'ch him!" Eliphalet cried.

"Tell that to the marines! Well, Hawks is out of the way, but I am here!"

"You're all on the wrong track. I don't know about you an' Hawks, but my name ain't Bunker, an' never was. You may b'lieve what you say, but it's pooty rough on me ter hev sech charges brought ag'in' me."

"What an old innocent! You assert a good deal, but I'll bet you'll pay me to keep quiet. That's why I'm here. The price of safety is five thousand dollars. Will you pay it, Gold Monarch, or shall I tell my story to the world at large?"

CHAPTER XXIII.

AN AUDACIOUS WOMAN.

"So you're a blackmailer!" Old Humility exclaimed.

"What of it?"

"Do ye know thar's a law ter punish sech?"

Spitfire Nell made an impatient gesture.

"You make me weary; unutterably weary. If blackmail is punished, how about murder? Come, sir, let us not beat about the bush, but have a business understanding. You are a man of wealth, very much respected, and in a position to build up any great enterprise with which you see fit to associate your name. How would

a massive building look with 'Hodge College,' or 'Hodge Museum,' or the like, over the door? It would certainly be a better monument to your memory than a gallows—"

"But—"

"Hear me out. Look on the two pictures, and see if it is not better to give me the money for which I ask. It is a mere nothing to you, in dollars and cents; in another way, it is the price of safety and happiness."

"Why should I, fur another man?"

"Bah! If you persist in talking like that I shall tell the story broadcast within this hour. Be wise in your generation. For five thousand dollars I will keep your secret. Will you pay or not?"

Madame Mystery threw back her fine head and asked the question with haughty indifference. She despised this old man as much as she hated him. As a rule, young women do despise men upon whose heads show the white hairs of age, be they few or numerous. Young women represent the present generation—in their own opinion—and they believe that twenty odd years of experience have made them far wiser, in all ways, than are those of double or three times their age.

Usually, this is a vast mistake of callow young ladies, but, unfortunately, Eliphalet Hodge was not the man to meet any sharper in mental conflict, be she old or young.

His reply was ready, however, and it was much firmer than was to be expected.

"I won't pay a cent!" he declared.

"Careful!"

"My name ain't Cyrus Bunker, an' I won't pay for his sins."

"You will pay in money, or with your life!" flashed Spitfire Nell.

"What's ter hender me havin' you arrested fur tryin' ter blackmail me?"

"Fear! You dare not do it, sir!"

"Ef you wa'n't a woman—"

"The cry of a coward. Better give the money."

"I refuse!"

"Do you remember," cried the woman, out of patience, "that you have a daughter? What about Agnes! Will you drag her down in the dust? Think of your daughter, man! Think how she would feel with her father accused of murder, tried, convicted, hanged!"

It was her last shot, and it was made with dramatic force. At the first mention of Agnes's name she knew that she had found the way to her victim's heart. For himself he cared but little in comparison with his regard for Agnes. When her happiness was imperiled, the iron all left his nature.

He began the uneasy shifting of position so characteristic of him when he was ill at ease.

"Think of Agnes!" Nell slowly added.

"She wouldn't b'lieve aught ag'in' me."

"That would make it all the worse for her if the laws had sent you to the gallows. But, nonsense! Why should you go, when five thousand dollars will purchase safety?"

Old Humility began to be convinced. Sure enough, why should he let that sum stand between him and safety? He could pay out five thousand dollars and never know the difference at the end of the year.

"Ef I do it, will you leave Honeysuckle?"

"If you wish."

"I do!" Hodge eagerly declared.

"That part is of no value. I was intending to go to California next spring, anyway; I had just as soon go now as ever."

She spoke with an appearance of frankness and sincerity, but treachery was in her heart. She did not intend to leave Honeysuckle, or to be bribed to silence. She was bound to bring Hodge to the bar of justice for killing Percival Drew, and the blow would fall sooner if he paid her the money that day than if he delayed for a week or a fortnight.

The matter of blackmail had been a new idea, and she considered it a great act of diplomacy to secure the money and then crush him just the same.

Eliphalet thought of Cole Boylston and doubtfully asked:

"What about yer friends?"

"I don't understand."

"O c o' them come ter me with a so-called 'fable'—"

"Boylston does not know the secret."

"An' you won't tell him nothin'?"

"I will not tell him a word."

"S'pose Hawks shows up?"

Nell smiled sarcastically.

"Do you think he will?"

"Yes."

"I must question your veracity when you make the statement, but that part is not material. If you and I come to an understanding, my agreement with the detective is off. He came to Honeysuckle to meet an unknown who was to point Cyrus Bunker out to him. He never gained a clew to the unknown's identity, however, so he can pop up from the grave—if he can—and be without a suspicion that you are Bunker."

"I ain't Bunker!" Old Humility asserted.

Nell shrugged her well-rounded shoulders.

"All right, sir!"

"All you charge ag'in' me is wrong, but ef it will keep talk down, I s'pose I kin afford ter pay ye to keep still about the whole affair."

"Wise Gold Monarch!"

At that moment Nell looked out and saw Agnes approaching the building. It flashed upon her that the girl was coming to visit her father, and the audacity of an evil mind at once came to the surface.

"Softly, old man!" she added. "Your charming daughter is at hand, and, to hide your secret, we must be as wise as serpents. Assume an air of courtesy to me, and please don't say anything to start my temper—I might thoughtlessly betray you!"

Mr. Hodge was greatly annoyed by the thought that the two young women must meet, but, failing to see the lurking evil in Nell's words, he did not think of denying that the advice was good.

Agnes entered.

"Oh! so you are here, father?" she lightly said. "I was not sure—"

She stopped at sight of the adventuress, her face clouding somewhat. Eliphalet could think of nothing to say, but Madame Mystery bowed and smiled in a gracious manner.

"How do you do, Miss Hodge?" she asked, sweetly. "I am pleased to meet you again. I dropped in to see your father on a matter of business, but did not suppose that I was to have the pleasure of meeting you. Please don't let me stand in your way. I am not a fortune-teller on this occasion, but an ordinary woman of business."

"She come ter see me about it," added Mr. Hodge, vaguely, feeling that he ought to say something, and succeeding very poorly in the attempt.

Agnes bowed, smiled and murmured a few words of civility which were not strikingly cordial.

"I have not had a chance to speak with you since the night of your reception, Miss Hodge," pursued Nell.

"I have not had my fortune told lately."

"No doubt you have found it pleasant, though."

"Of course."

"You have lost your friend, Miss Wilberley."

"Yes."

Agnes answered gravely. She had not become reconciled to Lorraine's departure, nor had she been able to understand it. At one time, the Wilberleys had been so well pleased with Honeysuckle that they had spoken of staying until the approach of cold weather, but Lorraine had taken a sudden freak—or something else—and away they had gone.

"Mr. Hodge," pursued Nell, audaciously, "has just invited me to pass a few days at his house, but I cannot hope to fill Miss Wilberley's place."

Utter silence! Agnes was dismayed, and somewhat annoyed to think that her father should seek to give her such company. But her emotions were weak compared to his.

The Gold Monarch was dumfounded.

"You must know," Nell went on, exulting in her sudden, bold idea, and the dismay it had caused, "that I am soon to leave Honeysuckle. I have told the fortunes of all who care to see the future unrolled like a map, and must now seek other fields. I think I shall go to California, or, perhaps, to Mexico. Mr. Hodge has kindly asked me to make the last few days of my stay here a relief from labor, and to dwell under his roof."

She gave the unhappy Gold Monarch a secret glance. There was a good deal in it. Her new scheme was as sudden and unpremeditated as it was daring. Would it succeed, and how did he take it?

His face was as glum as a funeral mourner's. "P'raps Agnes won't find it convenient," he muttered feebly.

"Oh! I am no trouble. Miss Hodge and I shall get along finely."

There was a chance for Agnes to speak, but she said nothing. Usually, she was very attentive to her father's wishes, but she could not bring herself to welcome a woman she feared and suspected.

"What I want most is rest," pursued Nell, with a sigh. "I am tired out. I shall probably keep my room a good deal, if you will forgive the seeming incivility, but I am not disposed to refuse the chance of having a real home for two or three days. I accept your invitation, dear Mr. Hodge!"

She gave "dear Mr. Hodge" a glance, anything but loving. Not yet had he said a word to back up her self-offered invitation. It was time for him to do so, and her glance was full of menace. She was bound to carry her audacious point or make trouble.

CHAPTER XXIV.

AN OMINOUS DISCOVERY.

OLD HUMILITY was miserable. He had as soon invite a serpent to his house as Madame Mystery. The experiment would not be more dangerous, and while he could crush the head of the one, the law would protect the other.

Nevertheless, he dared not refuse her. It was not just, he felt, that, when he had yielded the

other point, she should follow it up by making such a demand. It was not likely that she would run away with his house, and no selfish motive actuated him, but he felt that it was an insult to Agnes to ask her to accept such a companion.

One thing, however, was certain—he dared not refuse, and he proposed to make the best of it. He bowed meekly, as it were, before her threatening gaze.

"Our house ain't a palace, but it's fairly comfortable, an' I guess you'll find it more so than your rooms. Anyhow, a couple days thar ain't long."

Nell realized that the last remark was as much for Agnes as for herself, and a good deal more for both than as an idle remark.

His would-be shrewdness looked so transparent to her that she smiled in amusement.

"I shall do very well," she announced.

The die was cast, and as Agnes had never been guilty of rudeness to those whom her father saw fit to make his guests, she compelled herself to take part in the conversation.

"We will try to make you comfortable, madam," she announced.

"Thank you. We shall be friends, I know."

"At least, I hope we shall not quarrel."

"Quarrel? Decidedly not! Your amiability is the talk of the town, and I am good-natured enough not to annoy any one of that kind. Your kind face will make me happy, Miss Hodge. My life is more one of money-making than the formation of friendships, owing to my peculiar business; and it is a great relief to feel, at times, that business is put aside for better things."

Nell could act the womanly part when she saw fit, and this was one of the occasions when she did see fit. Clearly, she had carried her point and was going to Hodge's house. Such being the case, she was too wise to try the domineering role further.

She grew gracious and ladylike, and Agnes lost some of her aversion.

"I am going home now," she announced.

"When shall we see you, madam?"

"I will accompany you."

With this calm statement the Far-Seer turned again to the unhappy Gold Monarch.

"Shall we have the pleasure of your escort, sir?"

He wanted to refuse, but was reluctant to leave her alone with Agnes. Her lawless tongue might at any moment get in motion, and say things which would reveal too much to Agnes. It would be prudent to watch her, and try to keep her in control.

"Sartain—sartain!" he returned, hastily, and then arose.

They left the office and walked toward the Gold Monarch's house. Those who saw them go thought that he had never moved more awkwardly, which was quite superfluous on his part. He had never felt more nervous and disturbed. Curious glances were bent upon the trio, and he half-expected to see some citizen step forward and accuse him of making a guilty bargain with the woman, to protect himself.

The house was reached, and Nell proceeded to make herself at home. She did not exactly overdo the matter, for her shrewdness remained, but she did not let ceremony interfere with her comfort.

In due time she was shown to a private room.

When once alone she looked at her surroundings with scorn. She admired grandeur, and liked to live with it around her. Little of the sort had ever come to her. She had made some money in her peculiar business, but it had all gone to gratify her luxurious tastes.

"The old miser!" she muttered: "how cheap and plain everything is! Lucky for him that I am not his daughter! Well, well; these things will do, since I stay but a short time. Do I go away soon? Why should I? I am safely domiciled here, and he dares not turn me out. What if I decide to stay?"

She meditated on the point for several seconds.

"I can make him hand over the hush-money, and agree to move on at once. Then, when the beautiful dollars are in my grasp—then why not remain? Ha! ha! I can imagine the old fellow's dismay when I announce that I am to stick to him!"

This was pleasant anticipation, but other, and less agreeable thoughts followed.

"Zeke Ralston will soon return. I have not yet made that incomparable man adore me, and I am not sure that he would stand idle and let me rule Hodge with despotic power. The magnificent Hotspur knows I am Hodge's enemy. If he is of a prying nature, he may learn that I am not a welcome guest—Would he then be so mean as to set his foot upon me?"

She drummed upon the table with her white fingers and frowned becomingly.

"If any other man interferes with my position here, I will kill him!" she muttered, viciously; "but Ralston—ah! that's a different matter! How can I handle him?"

This was an enigma she could not solve, off-hand. She knew that Zeke had stubborn firm-

ness, and, thus far, she had not made any impression on his heart.

Would her chances be better on Cupid's field when he found her ruling his old friend through the power of fear?

"I'm afraid my glorious Hotspur will yet do me damage. I must study up a way to manage him! How can I?—how can I?"

It was easier to ask the question than to answer it, and she postponed the matter for the time. After busying herself for awhile she went to the parlor. Agnes was not there, but Old Humility was. The glance he gave her was not one of welcome.

"I am delighted with my quarters, sir," she announced in her best manner.

"Be you?"

"Yes; a charming place, charmingly arranged."

"I—I did not expect— That is, you did not mention until Agnes came that you wanted ter come ter my house," the Gold Monarch observed, in a tone of complaint.

"True. It was a sudden thought of mine."

"I hope no harm will come on't."

"How can harm come of it?"

"I don't know, but I don't like—"

"To have me here? Very likely, sir; but possess your gentle mind with patience, and you will soon see the last of me. Believe me, Mr. Hodge, I am not here to canker your poetic life and instill lumps of poison into others' minds. I am not hypocrite enough to say that I am your friend, but I certainly do not intend to annoy a man who will give me a boodle."

"I'm glad ter hear it."

Nell had spoken with an air of frankness which was very deceptive, and Eliphalet was so anxious to believe her that he did so for once. A sigh of relief followed his reply.

A smile flitted across her face.

Before she was done with Old Humility she intended to place him in the hands of the law. She had come to Honeysuckle for that purpose, and, unless she misjudged her own vindictiveness, nothing could turn her from her purpose.

Hodge tried to appear at ease, but it was not a success. He was as well fitted for an assumed part as a child, and no better. His face could not help mirroring his thoughts and his mood. In former days, when all went well at Honeysuckle, this was not objectionable, and the poor and unfortunate found a look at him wonderfully encouraging, but he could not help betraying his present trouble as he had done former enjoyment.

Nell made no serious breaks, and conducted herself with decorum, both during the afternoon and the supper which followed.

Immediately after this meal, Agnes disappeared.

She had a fancy for twilight walks, and fearing that the unwelcome guest would claim her attention, she slipped away quietly, and gained a retired place as soon as possible.

Outside the village was a stream of water, which, starting on Mount Anvil's rugged side, flowed past the camp, and went on through Powderhorn Valley. All of that region was well wooded, and the stream flowed through a piece of timber nearly all the way until a mile south of Honeysuckle.

It was along this stream that Agnes had gone to walk.

She forgot the scene at home, in a measure, as she wandered along and enjoyed the company of the trees and water. At one point a huge dead tree had fallen close to the stream, beaten down the bushes, and then lay half on land and half in water. She sat down upon its trunk, and looked to see the change its descent had made.

She saw more than she had expected. Some odd, dark-colored object, which was half concealed by the bushes, attracted her attention. She had carried a stick like a cane, and with this she poked at the object and lifted it. A man's hat came into view.

It was not just the place where one would expect to find hats, when such articles cost considerable money, and the present case was rendered all the more striking by the fact that the hat was nearly new.

Agnes drew it toward her. As it was so fresh and clean there was nothing repulsive about it, even though the owner was unknown. He did not long remain unknown. She saw lines, which formed rude letters, scrawled on the sweat-band, and carelessly proceeded to read:

"D. HAWKS—HIS HAT!"

Such was the inscription, and it sent a thrill of alarm over her. She, like every one else in Honeysuckle, had heard of the Daniel Hawks who was supposed to have been murdered, and as all this occurred to her, she flung the hat away.

There was something shocking and alarming in the idea of having the property of one who had been the victim of a tragedy like that.

This feeling lasted only for a moment. She was not naturally a coward, and if Daniel Hawks had died by violence, it was the duty of every one to help unravel the mystery. She thought she was upon the threshold of dis-

covery, or, at least, that the last act in the drama of Hawks's life had occurred at that spot. The water was deep, and had a brisk current; it would take away any object confided to it, which would float.

The immediate spot where the hat had been found proved of great interest to Agnes. She descended from the log and began to search further in the bushes. Her first discovery was that there was a trail through them, and that several of the smaller twigs had been broken off.

Had this been done by the falling tree, or in another way? She could not see how the tree could touch at that point, and further investigation showed irregular, deeply-worked footprints in the soft earth.

Two men might have made them when passing along, bearing some heavy burden.

This idea was so suggestive that she became frightened again, and started up to leave. As she did so her foot struck and knocked out into view, something which proved to be a book. It was one of those abominations known to the world as a "dairy," and was as fresh as the hat had been.

She opened it. Idly scrawled upon the first leaf was the inscription—"D. Hawks—his book." That, like the marking of the hat, with its quaint, old-fashioned form of expression, appeared to have been done in some moment when time hung heavily on the writer's hands.

Agnes opened the leaves at another point. By chance, it was at the last entry, and she started a little as she saw her father's name.

"Met Mr. Eliphalet Hodge, to-night—"

It was a record of interest to her, and she read on quickly. What followed was startling.

CHAPTER XXV.

FRESH DANGER FOR OLD HUMILITY.

EACH page in the diary was headed with a date, and that of the last entry in the book was the day before Daniel Hawks's mysterious disappearance. Agnes saw that, at first glance, and was eager to learn what he had written.

When she had once begun she could not have stopped until the end was reached.

The record was as follows:

"Met Mr. Eliphalet Hodge, to-night, and laid my case before him. He had promised to help me actively in my search for X. Gave him key to my room here so that he could enter at any time, day or night. Am on the scene, and shall look for my man to-morrow. A suspicion occurs to me just now that I may have been deceived here by X. Shall secure my room well. Lucky the key to my door is not in the hands of X, but in those of honest Mr. Hodge."

There the record ended, but there was enough of it to startle Agnes. Hawks had met her father and given him a key with which he could enter the room.

"Impossible!" the girl exclaimed. "I have read incorrectly."

She read a second time, but there was no way to mistake the record.

"And father never revealed this! How strange! Why, I am almost sure I heard him say that he did not see Hawks, and I know I heard him tell the landlord that it seemed impossible for any one to enter the room!"

Her wonder increased, and she turned back a leaf. There was another entry of interest.

"I am now close to Honeysuckle, and shall soon be after my man. If, as I think, he is wholly unsuspecting, I shall nab him easily. On the other hand, if he is aware of danger, he will probably try to do me up. I shall go light and not let any one suspect that I am a detective, except Mr. Hodge. If all accounts are true, I can safely put myself in his power."

The last few words jarred upon Agnes's nerves at that moment. Put himself in her father's power! It was a chance expression, but not pleasing to her.

She read further, but found no additional clue to the circumstance which had brought Hawks there. If he had committed the unpardonable crime of keeping a diary of unnecessary experiences and plans, which no good detective would do, he had partially atoned for his error by preserving a certain amount of secrecy, and had made the records obscure.

Agnes finally went back to that troublesome last entry. What did it mean? If he had really met Old Humility, why had the latter failed to say so? Why had the detective given him a key? Why had her father never mentioned the key?

Every one had talked long and earnestly about the mystery of how an enemy had entered the missing man's room, and declared that they could not see how any one could have entered.

Now, directly before the girl's eyes was Hawks's own statement that he had given Eliphalet Hodge a key which would enable him to enter at any hour.

"I won't believe it!" Agnes murmured. "There is some mistake."

Then a sudden idea occurred to her.

"He did not meet my father, though he thought he did. Really, it was the unknown man to whom he refers here, and he was deceived. He met his enemy, and put himself in that person's power by giving him the key. Fatal, fatal mistake!"

The theory was really plausible, and it gave

her a good deal of relief. Come what might, she would not believe that Old Humility had ever done harm to any human being, but the positive assertion in the detective's own hand had worried her at first.

"Yes, it was some other man, representing himself to be father, whom Hawks met. Father must know of this at once, and I will carry the diary to him. He will know best what to do; but I do not doubt that the missing man was murdered and flung into the water here!"

He looked at the dark stream and shivered.

Night was making itself felt in the wood, and her recent discoveries had made her feel like anything but wandering there after dark. She at once started for home, carrying the diary with her.

When she reached the village she saw Madame Mystery going toward the house where she had reigned as a fortune-teller. Circumstances enabled her to pass the woman without being seen, and she gladly improved the chance. Time did not lessen her aversion to the Far-Seer.

Quickening her steps, she soon reached the Hodge residence. Old Humility was said to be in his room, and she hastened up-stairs. His door was ajar. He had closed it, and supposed it to be as he had left it, but the wind, or some other cause, had opened it again.

Agnes paused and looked in. Although nearly dark, no lamp had been lighted, and the Gold Monarch was hardly visible at the table where he sat.

His position gave the girl a feeling of uneasiness. His arms had been crossed on the table, and his head rested upon them. The attitude was one full of suggestion—it was such as might be assumed by a man in deep trouble. Agnes hesitated, and then entered.

Her soft footsteps did not arouse him.

"Father!"

She pronounced the word, but he did not stir.

Again she spoke, but with the same result. She advanced and touched his shoulder. Then he sprang up hurriedly, almost overturning his chair, and stood gazing at her in silence. The darkness concealed his face, but no one could be blind to the fact that he was frightened.

"Why, father, it is I!" Agnes exclaimed.

"You? Yes, yes; why, of course it's you. Sertain! Who said not?"

"I thought you didn't know me, at first, in the dark."

"Oh! I knowed ye, my dear, as soon as I got awake. I was asleep, ye see, when you come in."

This statement was not true, and would have been received with doubt by any one except Agnes. She, however, strong in her faith in her father, accepted it without hesitation, and brightened up.

"Poor father! you ought not to work so hard."

"Nothin' rests me so much as work does."

"A queer way to rest; but that is not what I came to say. I have something to show you. First, I will make a light."

She did so. By that time the Gold Monarch had recovered from his shock, and showed no emotion.

"What do you think I've found?" she added.

"I ain't the least idee, child."

"I believe I have a clew to lost Daniel Hawks!"

He met her gaze without wavering.

"You don't say so! What is it?"

"I have found his diary, and it gives some clew. He came here to find some man; met him, to his sorrow; and I believe the poor man has been killed."

"Which one? Hawks?"

"Yes."

"I don't see who should do so."

"It was some man who deceived him, and made him believe he was you, and Hawks actually gave him a key to his room, thinking he was you!"

Agnes had her pronouns a good deal mixed up, but she had made herself clear enough to startle Old Humility afresh. He looked at her with enlarged eyes, and with a strange expression on his face.

"Who says that?" he asked blankly.

"This diary, written by Hawks himself, and left on the scene of his final disappearance from the eyes of mankind. Listen."

She read that last record of the diary. Eliphalet listened like one stunned. Unlike her, he did not need to search for a way to reconcile the statements; he knew that every one was true.

"It surprises you, don't it, father?" unconsciously Agnes added. "It did me, at first, for he was very positive in his assertion that he had seen you, and given you a key to his room. A little thought, however, showed me that he had been deceived; that his unknown enemy had met him, pretended to be you, and deceived Hawks so completely that he was given a key. Don't you see how it was?"

"Yes, yes; sure enough!" declared Hodge, glad to have an excuse offered him. "Somebody must 'a' done so."

"Probably the man he was in pursuit of."

"Sure enough!"

"This explains a good deal, and he will now promptly be caught."

"Most likely he will."

"Shall you see about it to-night?"

"See about what?"

"Why, the investigation."

"This don't tell *whar* he went ter."

"I did not refer to that; but I will say that I found the diary over by the stream, nearly due north from Hosanna Hank's shanty. Hawks's hat was there, too. At that point the stream is deep, dark, and rather swift, and it is clear that they threw in the body there. But what my question referred to was your course in notifying the officers of law. Of course you will see the sheriff, give him this diary, and explain the mistake in what Hawks wrote."

Agnes was not trying to be officious; she took it for granted that her father would proceed just as she said. But he looked at her as though frightened anew.

"Why should I?" he asked, after a pause.

"Because it will help to unmask the guilty persons."

"Will it?"

"Yes. The sheriff must discover to whom Hawks gave that key."

The Gold Monarch wiped the perspiration from his forehead nervously. He felt himself cornered. Nothing could induce him to tell the story of the key. Even if he told it, and explained matters as Agnes would have him do, it would not add to his safety. On the contrary, he would start an investigation which would be likely to crush him. Spitfire Nell knew the truth, and she had said that one person, besides herself, had seen the key given to him.

He sought desperately for an excuse.

"I don't hev no great faith in this diary," he finally said. "It may be all a joke, while as fur the key, I don't believe thar was any."

So saying, he pulled his handkerchief from his pocket, and as he did so, out came a big brass key also, and fell rattling on the floor!

CHAPTER XXVI.

WHO WAS THE GIRL.

THE morning sun was casting its first rays upon the mountains. The scene was wild, with an abundance of rocks and scraggy timber.

Near the summit of a little knoll a man lay in ambush, well concealed by leaves and vines which hung over him.

The man was Wyoming Zeke, and he was reconnoitering a larger knoll ahead of him. During the hours of darkness which followed the capture of Childeric Hall, he had followed the kidnappers until he had run them into their camp on the larger knoll. Day was dawning when they arrived. He was firm in his intention to rescue his friend, and might have made some move at once, had not the enemy posted sentinels so that he could not approach the camp unseen, either to attempt a rescue or to look the scene over.

This he was not able to do thoroughly at a distance, on account of the formation of land, and did not know what manner of a place they had there.

His opinion of Deaf Drake was somewhat unsettled.

Since the fight he had entertained some doubts that the dispenser of the Egyptian cure-all was a mere honest vagabond. He would not have been surprised to see him among the schoolmaster's captors.

Deaf Drake was not there. Where was he? Whither had he gone after the camp was pitched in the hills? He had been absent when he was most wanted, and the Hotspur would not have staked any money on his loyalty or honesty.

Smoke arose from the higher knoll, and suggested that the party there were preparing breakfast. Zeke, with an eye to the future, had secured a little something at the former camp, where Hall was taken prisoner, after the enemy had gone, and had sufficient to last during the day. It was cold, but he was not inclined to wish himself with the schoolmaster.

Not yet had he learned who the kidnappers were, except that one was Perk Tuttle.

It has before been explained that road-agents and outlaws were wholly unknown around Honeysuckle, and it was a puzzle to understand this outbreak. One man, or two men, might overstep the law anywhere, but a gang with a camp, and a predilection for abduction, was a surprise and a riddle.

Ralston did not cease to watch closely, and he soon had cause to congratulate himself on his patience.

Figures appeared and disappeared within the outer circle of the camp, as they passed to and fro in their work, but one finally met his gaze quite out of the ordinary run. There was the flutter of garments more voluminous than those worn by the male part of the human race, and Zeke whistled softly.

"A woman, by thunder!" he muttered.

Yes; there was no room to doubt it. She had come to the vicinity before noted, and paused in what appeared to be a thoughtful attitude. His view was indistinct, but it revealed that much.

What she was like he could not tell. She might be old or young, homely or beautiful, an angel or a tigress—he could not say that she was either or neither.

A man approached her, and she turned away. As her course was toward the heart of the camp, she was soon lost to view.

"Well, now, this grows interesting!" Zeke muttered. "When woman deigns to be seen in an outlaw camp the case takes on a romantic complexion—unless she is old and ugly. I don't think this one was of that stamp. She moved too freely for one weighed down by years. Who can she be? A prisoner?"

The last mental inquiry, when considered, gave him fresh interest. He wished that he could see the camp, but it was out of the question.

He could only remain where he was and keep up the vigil.

"I am not particularly romantic," he resumed, "but the temptation is strong to invest this unknown with a mantle of beauty, as well as of mystery. Let us suppose that she is lovely, intelligent and rich. Just a match for friend Hall, though I suppose he would keep up his fancy for Agnes Hodge. Well, well, I'm outside the lines of love and gallantry!"

He thought of Lorraine with a twinge of pain which would trouble him whenever he remembered what he had lost.

He was now in practice as a cynic, and not disposed to be interested to a romantic degree in any woman.

An hour passed, and then there was a sudden increase in activity on the knoll. Breakfast was over, and the men were again free to seek more active employment. Zeke saw them moving about for some time, and then two of their number left the camp with rifles on their shoulders.

They did not pass very near him, and he felt no particular interest at the time, but was destined to see them later.

Not being satisfied with his own position, he changed it, an hour later, and started for a point east of the camp. It was not hard to get concealment out of the numerous rocks and bushes, and he had little fear of discovery.

His journey was nearly made, and he was congratulating himself on his success, when, passing through a gap in the rocks, he came face to face with a man—an encounter so sudden that it could not be avoided.

Both stopped short, and, as only a few feet separated them, trouble would have followed had not the recognition been mutual.

The other wanderer was Deaf Drake.

Zeke was not pleased. He doubted the man and would gladly have avoided him if he could. Eli, however, grew smiling as the sun at once.

"Hullo! hullo!" he exclaimed. "Got around, ain't ye? Didn't know whar in creation ye was, by mighty!"

"Where did you suppose I was?" tartly demanded the Hotspur.

"Hadn't an idee."

"Where have you been?"

"Hev' I any gin? No; but I've got some whisky, an' some Royal Egyptian Ointment—"

"Where were you last night?"

"Be they all right? Why, of course—"

Zeke grasped Eli's arm in a savage way.

"Drop it!" he sternly ordered. "This is no time or place for me to raise my voice and shout like a lunatic in Bedlam. You must hear like other men, now. You know I have no faith in your deafness—and not much in you."

If Drake heard any part of this, he did not betray the fact.

"I'm lookin' fer my mare, Polly," he explained. "Lost her last night—mebbe you kin tell whar she is. I hate ter part from that hoss. She's o' high blood, an' has many takin' ways. She's only thirteen year old, goin' on twelve; but thar is hosses twenty year old that can't trot half so fast as she can. Fack, by mighty!"

"Drake, where were you when we fought at the camp last night?"

"Was there a fight? I s'pected it. I went ter walk, an' when I got back, the camp was deserted. Thought at fu'st that you an' the peddlegogue had stole Polly an' gone, but finally seen the arms an' legs layin' around loose, an' drawn conclusions hencefrom. I follered Polly's trail, an' hyer I be. Jes' so, by sin!"

Eli banged the breech of his rifle down on the ground, and seemed to be very much vexed about something.

"Have you found Polly?"

"I ain't seen the sagacious critter, though I have an idee she's up thar."

He pointed to the camp on the knoll.

"Have you seen that gang?"

"Confidential—I hev."

"Who are they?"

"I seen some familiar faces thar," Eli answered. "Seen Perk Tuttle; seen Cole Boylston."

"What! is he there?"

"Sure."

"Looks like a Cottoncliff crowd!" Zeke muttered; then he raised his voice and added: "Did you speak to taem?"

"Did I?" Drake returned, in a tragic voice. "Wal, I should say not! Can't run no resk o'

havin' the peddler o' the Royal Egyptian cure cut off in the flower o' his youth. Ef anybody else sold it, it might be adulterated. As 'tis now, it's dirt cheap at one dollar a bottle; six fur five—"

"Come to business! If you don't know those men, why are you so reluctant to speak with them? You ought to explain, for I am not wholly in love with your record, known and suspected. Your absence at the time of the fight, last night, was peculiar. If you are an ally of the enemy, you may as well own up. If you are an honest man, prove it; and then we'll try to pull ourselves out of the ditch."

"Is it good for the itch?" repeated Eli, with a sudden return of his deafness. "Well, I should say so. Joodiciously applied, it'll start the scales so fast they'll rattle like shot in a pouch as they fall off the hooman frame ter the floor."

Zeke grasped the vagabond by the collar and shook him without mercy. Eli looked profoundly astonished, but submitted without resistance or a murmur.

"I tell you to come to business!" Ralston sternly exclaimed. "No more nonsense now. Speak out, or I'll give you another whirl."

"Did I know the girl?" hastily answered Mr. Drake, still a victim of his ears. "No; I didn't. Tany rate, I didn't see her clost' enough ter tell; but she's a pris'ner, an' I know they're mean skunks. Would they hev her, t'otherwise? Wal, I reckon not. Very probable they hev Polly, too, but I shall go soft an' slow ter git that incomparable mare."

"Is Hall visible, also?"

"He is."

"Are you prepared to fight for him?"

"I ain't reckless, an' I won't go in thar an' try ter lick all creation, but I'm willin' ter thrash half on't. Show me the way, an' I'll wade in like a hippopotamus an' cut like sin!"

Deaf Drake flourished his rifle so close to Zeke's nose that the Hotspur prudently retreated a step. Eli appeared to be in earnest, and wrought up to a pitch of violence, but Zeke was by no means sure of him.

His excuse for being absent at the time of the fight was not reasonable, and there was room to suspect that he had acted the traitor and led the enemy there. Was he to be trusted?

CHAPTER XXVII.

WHO CAUSED THE EXPLOSION?

"DRAKE, I am going to have a look at that camp."

"Proper thing ter do."

"How will you occupy your time?"

"I'll wait hyar."

"What if one of the enemy comes along?"

"I'll hide."

"I don't suppose you would betray me to him?"

Wyoming Zeke looked sharply at his companion as he asked the question, but Deaf Drake beld up both hands in horror, genuine or feigned.

"How kin you ask it?" he plaintively returned. "Do I look like a traitor? Or a rascal? Or a sneak? I tell ye, a man that peddles an article good fur burns, boils, bruises, bunions and so forth, must be ekul ter the best an' excelled by few."

"Necessity compels me to trust you, Drake, but I am not sure how I shall come out. Your various acts have not pleased me greatly, but you may be all right. By trusting you now I put myself wholly in your power. I hope you will not abuse my confidence, for it might go hard with both of us if you did. I assure you, Eli, that I would devote every spark of life left in me to paying you off for your treachery, and the settlement would be fatal to one of us!"

Drake did not show any emotion, but he put out one hand deprecatingly.

"Cap'n, hear me!"

"Go on!"

"Did I ever do ye harm?"

"Not unless you betrayed us to Perk Tuttle and his gang."

"Perish the thought! I didn't do it."

"I'm glad to hear it."

"The Drakes ain't built that way. We're poor an' homely in the face, but our buddies are fairly saturated with honesty. My father an' two o' his brothers are in the fish business, an' they won't sell any fish that will go swimmin' Sunday. I've knowed ye some days, an' never done ye wrong. Trust me, an' you won't be sorry!"

"So be it, then. I'm going to creep near yonder camp and investigate."

"I'll wait for ye; an', ef ye git inter trouble, yell like sin an' I'll come right up an' die with ye!"

There was no such thing as understanding Deaf Drake. Now, as usual, he spoke in his peculiar husky whisper, but his manner was suggestive of neither good faith nor treachery. He was simply cheerful, and did not appear to comprehend how serious the trouble was.

Despite Zeke's resolution, it was some hours before he was able to put it into effect. The members of the gang had scattered somewhat,

lying down here and there, and an advance was out of the question.

It was not until near noon that Ralston thought it prudent to stir. When the outskirts of the camp became deserted, he moved.

Dropping upon his hands and knees he began a slow and laborious journey up the hillside. He had to take advantage of every rock and bush, and make sure that their cover was not forsaken at any time. Vigilance was the price of safety, and even that did not settle the matter. There was constant danger in the venture, but he was well acquainted with hazardous exploits.

The last he saw of Deaf Drake that ragged person was sitting on the ground with his back against a log, as serenely content, as far as appearances went, as though he were in Honey-suckle and engaged in selling his Egyptian cure-all.

He was a risky man to leave behind, but there was no help for it.

Foot by foot the Hotspur ascended the hill. Previous experience enabled him to do the work well, and no mishap occurred. He finally reached the edge of the camp, and then saw what he had suspected before—that the knoll had a cup-like hollow at the top.

In this was the camp, and Zeke looked for a suitable place from which he could view it. He saw the spot. A great slab of rock which might have served as the head-stone of a giant, lay upon other rocks, held a yard from the ground, and surrounded with bushes, low but thick.

This met with Ralston's approval. If there were no rattlesnakes inside, he could not find a better place. He crept under, and found the cosiest nook imaginable.

Then he parted the bushes at the further end for the coveted look at the enemy.

He saw a dozen rough, ill-dressed, hard-looking fellows, and all well armed. In their midst was Childeric Hall, bound to a tree, but left so that he could stand, sit or lie down, as he preferred.

The unknown girl was but dimly visible. A rock intervened, and he could see only a portion of her dress.

It was evident that the party could not be overcome easily. They were strong in numbers, well-armed, and, judging by appearances, were men who were accustomed to fighting. They bore scars seldom seen on men of peace, and looked as though they would not avoid further quarrels.

The whole party was at dinner. When this was finished there was a general stir, and the woman came into plain view, accompanied by a man. The latter was Cole Boylston.

It was not at him, however, that Zeke looked with the most attention. The girl proved to be a superior attraction, and a clear view of her filled the Hotspur with astonishment and dismay.

It was Lorraine Wilberley.

He could hardly believe the evidence of his eyes. Lorraine there! He had supposed that she was many miles away, and traveling on in peace and happiness toward the Pacific. The discovery was bewildering.

It was she, though—there was no room to doubt it.

Zeke experienced only deep regret. He bore her no ill will if she had said No to an important question asked by him. And it needed not Deaf Drake's statement to show that she was a prisoner.

What evil chance had placed her in such a predicament? He glared at Cole Boylston and felt like rushing out to wreak summary vengeance upon him, but sight of the many weapons carried by the gang kept his warlike ardor within due bounds.

Lorraine and Boylston walked toward the spy's covert, and he soon had a fair chance to observe her. She had not improved since leaving Honey-suckle. Her face bore a worn, weary expression, and had lost a good deal of its former high color.

They advanced to within a short distance of where he lay peering out of the bushes, and seemed about to leave the camp, but, considerably to his surprise, sat down on the very rock which was over him.

He heard Lorraine sigh.

"You seem disconsolate," Boylston observed.

"Why shouldn't I be?" she returned, wearily.

"I do not find this life unpleasant."

She made no reply.

"I promised you a frank talk," Boylston added, "and you shall have it. I have told you that you were captured by Norris Dayton's orders. That was not true."

"Indeed!"

"No; it was my own little scheme. I can't say just what Dayton thinks of you. He bears you ill-will because of his friend, Benjamin Plymouth, but how deep it is I don't know. Sometimes I suspect that he loves you more than he hates you."

"Providence forbid!"

"So say I! I want you myself!"

"Sir?"

"You may as well be let into the secret at once. What I have said is true. I did have a small-sized affection for Agnes Hodge once, but

that was before I knew you. It has been dimmed as the moon dims the stars. I have learned to worship you!"

It was a very matter-of-fact declaration, and Lorraine's reply was prompt.

"Perhaps it will interest you to know that I despise you!" she retorted.

"Why?"

"Can you ask? Your ruffians attacked us without provocation; my uncle was left sorely wounded—perhaps dying—and I was brought here. You are a mere ruffian!"

"I consider it bad form to discuss character when marriage is the main subject. Suppose we omit it?"

"Marriage is *not* the subject with me!"

"You prefer to stick to character, eh?"

Lorraine did not answer.

"I'm not any great shakes as an angel, I'll admit," Boylston added, "but how about yourself? You have a past. I have heard how Benjamin Plymouth—I believe his real name was Redmond Drew—loved you, and what it brought him to. You coaxed him into crime—"

"It is false!" cried Lorraine.

"Can you prove your innocence?"

"I shall not try."

"Redmond Drew died asserting that you had been his ruin; that you mesmerized him, and, by an unnatural power, compelled him to go and blow up the building in which was stored a will which would cut you off from coveted money."

"He spoke falsely!"

"Didn't you know him?"

"Yes."

"Were you not engaged to marry him?"

"Never!"

"At least, you knew him. He came of an unlucky family. His father, Percival Drew, was murdered by a man named Cyrus Bunker. The latter was sentenced to prison for life, escaped, fled, and, it is thought, came West. He may be here now. Then came Drew the younger, and he went to the dogs and died of a broken heart. Whose work was it?"

"Not mine!—not mine!" Lorraine cried.

"Do you mean to say that he destroyed the building with dynamite on his own hook?"

"I don't believe he did it."

"But he admitted it, before he died."

"Nevertheless, I don't believe he did it."

"That's queer! If you doubt the fact, in the face of his own confession, it must be that you know *who* did it. Girl, is it a fact that you do know—knew it then, and let Plymouth suffer? Whom were you shielding? By my life! a strange idea occurs to me! Can it be that 'twas *you* that blew up the building?"

CHAPTER XXVIII.

THE CRISIS APPROACHES.

WYOMING ZEKE heard the last words with disgust and impatience, for he attached no weight to them, but was surprised to hear Lorraine answer hurriedly:

"Indeed, I do not know! How should I? The officers of law failed to discover, and I was only a school-girl, then. I know nothing about it!"

"Why has my question so disturbed you?" demanded Boylston, in a slow, critical manner.

"Disturbed me? It has not."

"You are agitated."

"What of it?"

"New ideas come upon me, but they are vague—very vague. When I insinuate that not Plymouth, but some one else, blew up the building, and that you know who it was, you catch at the idea like a fish at a disguised hook. Why? What *do* you know about that old affair? Can it be that you made a bigger fool of Ben Plymouth than he even suspected?"

Lorraine's voice was perfectly calm as she answered:

"You are going from bad to worse, but you are at liberty to suspect what you please—think what you please. I care nothing about it."

"Let it drop, my dear. I don't care a fig how many crimes lay at your door; it is enough that you are a charming woman. When a man is in love he never does care whether his adored one is an angel or a demon. Excuse me, if I was rude, for I would not intentionally annoy one who is so soon to be my bride—meaning yourself!"

"Your bride!"

"Even so!"

"Don't flatter yourself that it will ever be."

"You object, then?"

"I do, decidedly."

"I am glad you mentioned it, for I shall know what to expect. Let me say, at once, that I have sent men to bring here a worthy clergyman, who will marry us according to the usages of his church. 'Usages' is a good word; I saw it on my first wedding 'certif.' Yes, fair Lorraine, we are to be married, to-night, whether or no!"

Zeke Ralston, almost wild with anger, waited anxiously for Lorraine's reply. It was slow in coming, but calm and to the point when made.

"If you are talking for effect, you will be disappointed," she answered. "If you are in earnest, I will say that I would kill either you or myself before I would submit to such a fate!"

"Am I so horrible as that?"

"You are!"

"Your frankness is refreshing, and makes me all the more eager to call you Mrs. Boylston. Enough of this, however; you can go back to your quarters, but put yourself in a bride-elect mood. As sure as you are living then, you will be my wife to-night."

With these words he arose. Zeke heard a scornful reply from Lorraine, and then they returned to the center of camp. If such an act would not have made the girl's chances all the worse, the Hotspur would then and there have given Boylston a disabling wound; he deserved it richly.

Ralston was not ready to subscribe to the statement that there would be a wedding in camp that night. Boylston might be able to find a minister unscrupulous enough to aid his schemes, but no force of numbers would terrify the Hotspur into standing idle while such a deed went on.

He surveyed the camp carefully.

Two rude huts had been constructed at one end of the depression, evidently very recently. They made a cover, and that was about all. A woman was at work in front of one of them, but at that distance her face looked quite as hard and brutal as those of the men.

Zeke studied each rock and bush, with the future in view, and considered how he could best act when night came.

He was anxious to retreat and see Deaf Drake, but the delay had proved fatal. Voices again sounded near his cover, and he found some of the men at hand.

"Cut for deal!" said a curt voice.

"Jake has it."

"All right. Go in, old man; but don't monkey with the pasteboards."

"Don't you worry; when I deal, it's a square deal."

All this ought not to have interested Zeke, but it did, wonderfully. The slab of rock above him had been selected as a card-table, and the men were settling down for a game. They might play all day.

They had arranged themselves in the way common to card-players, and the legs of one ragged fellow hung over the rock in just the place where Zeke wished to retreat.

He could no more get out from under the rock, unseen, than he could take wings and fly away.

Here was a stroke of ill fortune upon which he had not counted, and it came at just the wrong time. Not much opportunity had been given him for thought, but he had a vague idea that the proper course was to steal a horse from the gang and start Eli Drake for help, while he remained to watch and make sure that no harm came to Lorraine.

All this hope faded away: he was, himself, a helpless prisoner.

His anger burned warmly against the men on the rock. Many a time, in the past, he had played cards, himself, but now he was suddenly converted to the idea that such amusement was abominably wicked. At any rate, he would have been glad to see judgment overtake the men who had penned him in to gratify their predilection for handling the pasteboards.

The only hope was that they might soon tire of it, or quarrel, or be sent on some errand.

None of these things occurred except the quarreling, and that did not stop the game. They played with zeal, and all the while the hours passed on remorselessly; the sun sunk lower, and Night advanced to occupy the camp of Day, when the rival army had retreated.

Wyoming Zeke fumed and fretted, but he was helpless. Not being able to leave his prison, he stayed and blamed the evil luck that had placed him there. He dared not stir to any great extent, but, several times, he turned and gazed toward the East for signs of his ally.

He saw none; Deaf Drake was not to be seen or heard.

At times Lorraine walked about the camp, but always attended by the old woman. No chance was given her to escape. Cole Boylston did not force his attentions upon her, but he remained in camp.

As darkness drew near Zeke thought a good deal about the fellow's threat to make the girl his wife that night. Had he been in earnest? There was a small hope that he had not, but it was not satisfying.

Supper stopped the card-game, and, at last, Zeke had chance to escape. He went promptly. Making his way to where he had left Deaf Drake he looked for that person, but he had disappeared. Thorough search failed to discover him, and the Hotspur gave it up.

By that time it was dark, and he determined to return to the recess under the rock. It was an excellent point from which to watch the camp; he thought he would be able to leave, during the night, whenever he wished; and it was necessary to watch over Lorraine.

If she was placed in danger, through any circumstance whatever, he was resolved to go to her aid, let the danger be ever so great.

Returning, he ate a cold supper under the rock; the roughs had one in the valley that was warm and palatable.

"Thus does Fate unkindly bestow its gifts, and the good are not always rewarded. It is so all through life, from the time the bad boy steals the tarts and the good boy gets none," thought the Hotspur, as he swallowed what little he had.

Ordinarily, nothing could check his flow of good spirits, and only Lorraine's peril worried him on this occasion.

An hour later there was a stir in camp, and three men appeared. Two of them were the roughs he had seen go away in the morning, as before stated; the third appeared to be of an entirely different breed, and sight of him sent a chill over the spy.

He was, one would say, about fifty-five years old, and tall and slender in form. This appearance was strengthened by his dress. He wore a tight-fitting Prince Albert coat, which was buttoned from top to waist; and a high collar and black cravat matched it above.

Despite this, he was not a neat-looking man. The collar was almost black with dirt; the cravat was awry; and the coat smeared over with various things of various shades, most of which, it seemed, had been food accidentally dropped thereon. He had a scraggy beard, and long black hair, which was pasted down as though with much grease. His nose was very large and very red, and he looked one like well acquainted with dissipation.

Zeke's courage went down very low. Disreputable as the man was to look at, his make-up was that of a minister, as far as dress went; and it was not hard to surmise why he was there.

Boylston went forward to meet him.

"It's got to come!" Ralston muttered. "The iniquitous ceremony will go on unless I interfere, and I'll do it if I die trying. I must release Childeric Hall, and then we'll make the best fight we can."

He looked critically around the camp. Only a small portion was well lighted, and he felt sure that he could move around somewhat without being distinguished from the members of the gang.

Promptly he left cover and sauntered toward Hall.

He was taking his life into his own hands on a desperate chance. True he had two revolvers, but Hall had none. If he succeeded in releasing his friend, and the weapons were divided, they would have but one each, and the odds were in all ways terribly against them.

Through the semi-darkness he went, and no one gave any heed to his motions. He could see Lorraine in the hut set apart for her use, but the old woman was with her, and the roughs on every side.

Luck favored him, and he reached the point near the schoolmaster without trouble. He was about to speak in a low voice when Boylston and the supposed minister approached. There was no time to retreat, so Zeke assumed an air of careless ease and lay down on the ground.

The two men paused when near him. He was midway between them and Hall. He could hear what they said, but Hall could not. If he spoke, either they or the schoolmaster would hear easily.

CHAPTER XXIX.

AN IMPORTANT ADJUNCT TO THE CEREMONY.

"I AM sorry, Mr. Gadeley," observed Boylston, "that I have forced you to make such a long journey, but I will pay you well for your trouble."

"Mention it not, dear sir," replied Mr. Gadeley, in a nasal voice. "As an itinerant preacher of the Word I have often to make long journeys, and I think naught of it."

"Your pay shall be prompt. I dare say you will not object to that?"

"The love of money is the root of all evil, but no one can inveigh against money, itself. Verily, we should be like sheep lost and undone, without it. It puts raiment upon our weak and decaying bodies; it furnishes food and drink for our stomach. If a man offers me money shall I say, Nay, nay? No; I will say, Yea, yea; for he worketh poorly who hath an empty stomach. Even so!"

Mr. Gadeley clasped his hands, rolled his eyes upward and looked very devout.

"Your sentiments please me, sir," affirmed Boylston. "Now, you know why I have sent for you?"

"Yea—even so."

"I am to marry!"

"It is not good for man to be alone."

"Nor woman."

"Woman is a frail vessel; a clinging vine which needs a stout oak by her side."

"Suppose she don't cling?"

"Verily, woman hath a perverse mind, at times!" and the reverend gentleman shook his head and sighed dolefully.

"How are we to deal with such a woman?"

"Chastisement hath been tried, at times, with beneficial effect, but my cloth forbids me from giving countenance to such severe means. Rather would I recommend a fast and repentance, which might exorcise the evil spirit within her weak and sinful mind."

"What would you do with an unwilling bride?"

Boylston asked the question bluntly, feeling that he had found an obsequious tool.

"I should appeal to her reason."

"What if that failed?"

"Love frequently cometh only after many days of wedded life. Woman is mercenary, and not infrequently weds a man for his worldly possessions. If she takes the risk to further her selfish aims, why should not man take some risk, too?"

"And marry her, whether or not?"

"I cannot answer, Nay, nay!"

"Then you approve of it?"

"As a rule, I should say, Yea, yea!"

"My bride is unwilling!"

The reverend gentleman lifted both hands in sorrowful complaint.

"Oh! woman, woman!" he murmured; "why do you so vex the soul of good and patient men?"

Wyoming Zeke's blood figuratively boiled with indignation. If Boylston was a knave, Gadeley was even greater. He longed to spring up and chastise the fellow, then and there. Boylston was in the best of spirits, and he heartily continued:

"I see that you are a man of sense, parson; and I will see that you are well paid for the job. The young lady in the case is all right, or will be when her mind is settled. She and I have been engaged for a long time, but she has grown suddenly obstinate. Hence, the need of firmness and coercion."

"Verily, the whims of a callow damsel ought not to be allowed full scope. Wisdom cometh only with age, and young women are full of inexperience, vanity and conceit. I speak not in severity, but for their good, when I say these things should be driven out of them—yea, with the rod, if need be!"

"A marriage ceremony is better."

"Yea, yea!"

"And you will not heed her objections?"

"Nay, nay!"

"I'll see her at once."

"Deal firmly with the perverse damsel, and let her know what I have said. I am to man and woman a guiding light, and an example, and a counselor; and my days, they are many, and my wisdom profound; and whatsoever I say unto ye or unto her, that shall ye perceive to be good, and mine eyes shall see your obedience with commendation. Yea, yea! Even so!"

The reverend gentleman wagged his head and croaked out these delectable sentences with an utterance like that of a bullfrog.

Boylston departed in great good humor, while Mr. Gadeley came close to Wyoming Zeke.

"Whom have we here?" he asked, pointing to Hall.

"A prisoner!" curtly answered Ralston.

"Yea, yea? Of what foul crime stands he accounted?"

"Don't know."

"Is he a desperate ruffian?"

"Very likely."

"I will even speak unto him. As a preacher of the Word I have power to exorcise evil spirits, and, perchance, I may quicken the realizing sense of this son of Belial, and make him less like the brute that man is ere his inward being hath been subjected to the cleansing fire of repentance. What, ho! avaunt things accursed—I fear ye not!"

Gadeley waved his arms as though driving away the "things accursed," and then advanced to Hall.

Ralston thought that the quickest way to get rid of him, and secure a clear field for himself, was to let the reprobate have his way; so the Hotspur kept his place. Gadeley went near the schoolmaster and muttered for awhile, but his words were not audible to Zeke.

He did not stop long, but passed on toward the huts.

Then Zeke arose quickly and himself went to the tree.

"Hall!" he exclaimed, cautiously.

"Well?" was the brief reply.

"Don't you know me?"

"Great heavens! it is Ralston!"

"Hush! not so loud. Do you know what is going on here? Do you know that Boylston intends to compel Lorraine to marry him?"

"Yes, but—"

"Dare you fight all these men for her?—you and I against the whole gang?"

"Yes, of course; but—"

"Then I will cut your bonds—"

"Wait! They are cut already!"

"They are! By whom?"

"The minister just cut the whole lot," Hall answered.

"What?" returned the amazed Hotspur.

"Yonder old man, who says he is a minister, cut every rope that is around me."

"Why! he has agreed to aid Boylston!"

"Well, he told me that he was going to fight the whole crowd, and wanted me to chip in at the crisis, and give him a lift!"

"Stupid!" exclaimed Zeke, in a tone of irritation. "Why did I fail to see this before? Clearly, this man, he be minister or otherwise, is far from being the rascal he has represented

himself. By my life! he must be a bold fellow to think of tackling this gang all alone!"

Zeke was too modest to remember that this was just what he was planning to do, but the addition of one to their number had a very cheering effect. The parson had given Hall a revolver of huge size, and the sky began to brighten a good deal.

"Boylston hasn't a suspicion," observed Hall.

"No."

"Would he not be likely to send for a man he knew to be a rascal?"

"He probably thought that he knew him well, but the fact that he questioned him, shows that he was not sure. Observe! The minister is now talking with Lorraine, and I will go near. Remain here for awhile, Hall, but be ready to come into the game the moment that it is begun."

The Hotspur was full of eagerness, but he forced himself to act in a leisurely manner. He sauntered toward the group, after pulling his hat low down over his face, and was in time to hear Gadeley talking in his nasal, sanctimonious way.

"Sorely am I grieved, daughter," he declared, "to find within thee such a proud and contumelious spirit. To one of my cloth the sinful ways of woman are grievous and surprising. Why see they not that they ought to obey their superior being, Man? Oh! Woman, how thou hast turned this fair earth, which knew no sin before thy day, into a desert place and land of abominations!"

The parson's uplifted chin seemed trying to reach the clouds, but Ralston no longer heard him with contempt and aversion.

Clearly, they had a long-headed friend in the man who wore the unclean Prince Albert coat.

Lorraine answered with spirit that she was not to be coerced, and would never agree to marry Boylston. This angered that person, and he grasped her roughly by the arm.

"Why waste more time?" he demanded, savagely. "I'll have my own way, and won't condescend to ask you. Parson, go on with your ceremony! Perk Tuttle, take her other arm and compel her to stand by my side!"

Perk, whose ugly face bore a grin of amusement, started forward to obey; but Lorraine suddenly startled them all by producing a knife. She made a stroke at Boylston, and he only escaped by a hair's breadth. As it was, he stumbled and fell, and the girl turned to flee.

She ran squarely into Perk's arms, and he wrested the knife away and held her fast.

"Haw! haw!" he roared, convulsed with mirth. "See how the pritty dear comes ter my manly breast. Parson, I won't kick if you say the weddin' katerkasm now, an' marry her ter me!"

"Sword of Gideon!" quoth Mr. Gadeley, "this scene moveth me beyond my capacity, and I must e'en have some exercise, or wither like the severed reed. Friend Tuttle, I beg leave to offer my right hand in friendship."

He put out the indicated hand, but it was doubled into a fist, and Perk received a tremendous blow in the jaw, which made him turn an involuntarily somersault.

"Rescue! rescue!" thundered the parson, in a ringing voice, and with a second blow he knocked Cole Boylston clean over the brow of the hill, out of sight.

Ralston and Hall knew that the eventful moment had come, and were ready for it.

The gang were hurrying to their comrades' aid, but Zeke leaped into their midst like a tiger and began to lay about him with sturdy blows, which rattled the roughs around like ten-pins.

"Rescue! rescue!" he shouted, in return.

CHAPTER XXX.

A GRAPPLE IN THE DARK.

THE camp was like a disturbed hive of bees. The friends of the imperiled girl had not stood up like sticks, and, through sentimental reasons, let the enemy have time to realize the situation and attack them at their leisure; but, by means of forcing the fight, had taken the gang at a disadvantage and thrown them into great confusion.

Some of them, however, had coolness enough left to draw their revolvers, and one shot started the ball.

For a while there was lively work, and the firing was brisk, but the bewildered roughs could not seem to "pull themselves together." From the start they were without a head. Cole Boylston had not been seen since he was knocked over the ledge, and no one else tried to lead.

On the other hand, Zeke, Hall and Gadeley acted in concert, and, knowing the value of a good start, they fought like tigers. The parson did great work, and made more than his share of noise.

"Slay on!" he shouted, as he beat down a foe-man. "The evil-doers shall be cut off in their sins, saith the Good Book, and we are the chosen instruments of vengeance. In all the city there was not one holy one; no, not one. Strike on, and if any ask you if the work is just, answer, yea, yea! And if your hearts grow faint, and you feel like to falter, answer back to weak flesh, nay, nay! Down with the vipers that

breed in the miasmatic pools, and crush the thugs of the brawling wilderness! Fight, for our cause is just. Yea, yea!"

While loudly uttering these sentences, the parson had been fighting a stout opponent, and each of the last "yeas" marked a blow. The final one brought the man to the ground.

It was the last stroke of the skirmish. The roughs had lost all taste for such work, and they broke and fled. The smaller party were left masters of the field.

"Verily!" cried the reverend gentleman, "this is a sight good to mine eyes, and I exult when I see the wicked scoffers put to flight by the chosen ones of the faith. Even so did General Joshua do in the olden time, and Samson was a man after my own heart! Yea, yea!"

Zeke and Hall were both congratulating Lorraine, but Gadeley grasped each by the shoulder and forced them back.

"If you would talk a week hence, talk not now!" he said, warningly. "Get thee hence! Ralston, you know where the horses are kept—hurry to them, make your selections, and get out of sight. Don't wait for me. I have other work to do. By the time you are in the saddle I will either be with you, or have one there to speak for you. If he comes, obey him fully. Go, go! Nor look behind ye, lest, like Lot's wife, ye turn to pillars of salt. Go, and if any man would detain you, smite him sorely. Yea, yea!"

The loquacious parson had developed remarkable muscle, and he literally pushed them out of camp.

Ralston was not reluctant to go.

He wanted to say a word himself, but Gadeley took up all the time, and would allow no back talk. As they went they saw Boylston lying motionless where Gadeley had felled him, but there was no time for delay. The Hotspur had taken the liberty of clasping his arm around Lorraine's waist—merely for her own good, of course—and, with Hall beside them, they made good time in the retreat.

Gadeley disappeared almost immediately.

The horses were reached, and a selection hurriedly made. Zeke and Hall secured their own animals, and one of good appearance was taken for Lorraine. They mounted, and then the Hotspur suddenly remembered their eccentric ally.

"Where is the minister?" he asked, looking around.

Like an answer came a voice from the background of darkness.

"Git up, thar, Polly! Git up, ol' gal! What ye 'fraid on, ye skittish young female?"

And into view rode Deaf Drake, mounted upon his favorite mare.

"Hyer we be!" he announced, in a husky whisper. "Jest come from the parson, who says I'm ter foller ye—no, you're ter foller me, ter the land o' promise. Yea, yea—as the parson would say. Don't stop ter talk, fur Polly is restyve, an' the condemn'd outcasts may git er-round hyer, an' stab their bagonets inter our circumference!"

"Isn't Gadeley going, too?" demanded Zeke.

"Why ain't I showin' you?" demanded Eli, in return, as deaf as ever. "Wal, you jest foller, an' I will show ye."

"Where is the parson?"

"Shall we commit arson? No, we won't. Arson means ter burn things up, don't it? Wal, the outcasts' huts is so green they wouldn't burn nobow; an' we ain't got time ter do it. Come on, or you'll all git skulped—you will, by sin!"

Drake was, apparently, in his deafest state, and Ralston lost no more time. Gadeley had bade them obey his messenger, if he sent one, and Eli claimed to be the said messenger. The fire on the knoll showed human figures there again, and it would not do to stay.

Eli had started off, and was looking straight ahead in an obstinate way which indicated that he was going whether they did or not.

They followed in silence.

The danger of pursuit was great—in fact, it seemed impossible to avoid it. The defeated men would be spurred on by injured pride when they were over their scare; and, the moment Boylston was conscious again—if he was still living—there would be a human cyclone to urge them on.

His wrath could be imagined.

Lorraine, Hall, and even Zeke, could not help feeling nervous, but Deaf Drake was wholly self-possessed. His mind seemed fixed upon trivial subjects, and he talked to his quadruped in the old style.

"Git up, Polly, ol' gal!" he urged, jerking at the rein. "Don't be afeerd o' stumblin' over nothin', fur, ef ye tumble, I'll let ye fall on me ter break the force on't. You step so slow I should think ye was sixteen year old, instead o' thirteen goin' on twelve. G'lang! When we git ter some p'int o' civilization I'll feed ye a peck o' oats, mixed up with Royal Egyptian Ointment. Ef that don't make ye take up yer huffs, I don't know what will. I won't be mean with ye, Polly. You shall have all the Ointment ye need, though it costs money. One dollar a bottle; six fur five, an' revenoo tax not throwed off—"

The guide suddenly pulled in his mare, and held up a warning hand to his companions. They paused. Only a short distance away sounds were to be heard as though some one, or something, was moving toward them.

Deaf Drake slipped agilely from his horse, made another warning gesture and disappeared in the darkness.

His course was toward the suspicious sounds.

His movements were noiseless, and they had no clue to what he was doing. Nearer came the unknown person or thing, until Zeke began to grow nervous and wish he had dismounted while such a movement was safe.

Then came an increase of sound in the darkness—a struggle, brief but sharp—then silence.

Anxiously the riders again waited. Plainly, Drake had met an enemy. What had been the result? Zeke regretted that he had allowed a man of advanced years to assume the post of danger; but, in truth, Drake had given him no choice in the matter.

Just as he was beginning to worry, Eli reappeared.

"Wish these darned rocks was out o' the way!" the peddler grumbled. "Knocked all the hide off my tenderest corn, an' it'll take a hull bottle o' Ointment ter cure the mighty thing!"

"Whom did you meet?" Ralston anxiously asked.

"Must be as red as a beet? Wal, I reckon likely it is. A corn is a mean, worritsome thing, an' when ye hev knocked it all off, it *must* be red."

"Have you had a fight?"

"Yes; it's a shockin' sight. You're right, but we won't mention it now. Come on! Git up, Polly, ol' gal! G'lang!"

Eli had scrambled upon Polly's back, and they now resumed their way.

Zeke was out of patience with Drake. If there had been a doubt that his deafness was a sham, it was now gone. He had heard the sounds which announced danger before any of the others, and his sudden lapse into hard-hearing was not to be mistaken. Perversity, not affliction, accounted for it.

Once more he led the way, and the skill with which he picked out their route in the darkness was surprising.

Opportunity was offered to talk with Lorraine, and Ralston did not neglect it. She told the story of her recent adventures. She and Eben Wilberley had started on their journey in good faith, but had not gone far. Boylston and his men had attacked them, left the old lawyer wounded, and brought Lorraine back to where her rescuers had found her.

She had been civilly treated, but Boylston had at last shown his hand, as has been described.

Childeric Hall gave his own experience. He stated that the attack upon their camp by the members of the gang was made by them without authority, and that Boylston had been angry when he learned of it and saw the prisoner. He had no use for the schoolmaster, and he thought that the horses thereby gained would make them more trouble than they were worth.

It was this attack, as has been seen, that led to the loss to him of Lorraine.

Deaf Drake was leading the fugitives along in the best of shape, and this fact, combined with his fight with the unknown, gave Zeke a better opinion of him. When explanations had been made, and the Hotspur had time to meditate, he began to wonder over the connection between Parson Gadeley and Drake.

One had disappeared strangely; the other had as suddenly come into sight. What connection was there, *could* there be, between them?

For a moment Zeke wondered if they were not one and the same person, but he rejected the idea. The parson had been tall and slender; Drake was short and thick-set.

At least, that was what the observer's eyes told him.

If Eli had been near enough to answer Gadeley's call, and promptly appear as a guide, why had he not taken part in the fight on the knoll?

The puzzle was so interesting that Zeke again tried to engage the guide in conversation, but it was a lamentable failure. Eli was very good-natured, but he was deaf to a shocking extent. He could not—or would not—hear anything correctly, and the questioner gave up in despair and fell back to his former place.

Deaf Drake led on boldly and steadily.

CHAPTER XXXI.

AGNES HEARS ALARMING NEWS.

OLD HUMILITY'S unlucky, nervous movement, which brought forth the big key with his handkerchief, wholly completed his demoralization. He forgot to make any use of the handkerchief, and stood staring at the key.

Agnes felt a thrill of uneasiness. The key was of the ordinary kind, but, coming into view as it did just when they were talking about that which Daniel Hawks had given away, it was very suggestive. She picked it up.

"What have we here?" she asked.

"A key," faltered Mr. Hodge.

"I have never seen it before."

"Ain't ye?"

"No. What is it the key to?"

"I don't know. Agnes, I found that air key."

The poor old Gold Monarch was trying to assume an air of frankness and unconcern, but it was a lamentable failure. He gazed at the key in dismay. Well did he know that Agnes would not betray him, but he could not bear to have her think that he was guilty.

The girl was so accustomed to believe all he said that she caught at the last statement eagerly.

"It may be the key given by Hawks to the unknown man!" she exclaimed.

"I—I don't think so," Eliphalet faltered.

"We can go the hotel and try it in the door."

"No! no!—don't do it!" he cried sharply.

"Don't think of sech a thing. I know it wouldn't fit, because—because it ain't the reg'lar key. I mean, I know it *would* fit, fur Hawks told me so—"

He was struggling desperately to get out of his dilemma, and had only succeeded in getting hopelessly involved. Realizing this, he stopped short.

"Hawks told *you*!" Agnes repeated. "I thought that you did not see him!"

"Hush! hush!—not so loud. Can't you see that I am the man Hawks give the key to?"

The words came with sudden, explosive force, and with an accent of mental pain, and the startled girl looked at her father, fearing that his mind was affected. After firmly denying that he had received any key, or even seen Hawks, he had confessed both facts abruptly. She saw only deep distress in his kind old face.

She clasped one of his big hands in both of her small ones.

"Father," she said, in a voice which no one could doubt, so much tenderness and pity were expressed, "you are in trouble. Let me help you. Let me know all, and trust to me to help you."

There had never been a time when that voice did not prove potent to Old Humility, and it was so now. Her loving sympathy touched him deeply, and he rushed to the point of confession like a worried child. He did not see that he would inevitably force himself deeper into the quicksand.

"That's a fack, Agnes," he eagerly explained. "It was me who got the key from Hawks, an' all that he says in that note-book is right. I met him right arter he come ter Honeysuckle, an' had a long talk with him, an' he told me all about the case that brought him here. He did give me this key, but it ain't never left my hands, so the murderer didn't git inter Hawks's room with it."

"This adds to the mystery."

"Yes. I reckon somebody picked the lock."

"But they say it showed no signs of having been meddled with—not a scratch, even."

"They couldn't tell, sure."

"Why didn't you tell them about the key?"

Old Humility moved uneasily.

"I knowed the key had no part in the work."

"But why didn't you tell them you had seen Hawks?"

Agnes fixed a wondering gaze upon her father, and he saw that by confessing a part he had given rise to the natural inquiry of why he had not told all, at the time of the detective's disappearance.

He began to flounder again.

"I thought mebbe his goin' away was a trick on his part."

"A trick? What could be the object?"

"Wal, it might throw them he was arter off from the track."

"But did they know he was here?"

"They might, you know."

"Why did he come to Honeysuckle, anyhow?"

"Why?—why? Oh! I ain't any idee!" declared the Gold Monarch, hastily.

"But you said that you had a long talk with him, and that he told you all about the case that brought him here."

"Oh! you mean the case!—the—the case!" returned Eliphalet, pretending to be suddenly enlightened. "Yes; he tol' me all about *that*. I see, now, what you want. You want ter know about the—the case!"

Poor old Gold Monarch! There was nothing laughable about his words, absurd as they were in themselves. Simple as a child, and unfit for diplomatic shrewdness, he was floundering hopelessly, and was in sore distress.

Agnes saw this, and it was not idle curiosity or unkindness which led her to question him further. There was a mystery, and she felt that she ought to know it. He might be rashly shielding a friend—that he could be implicated in guilt was impossible—so she thought.

"Yes, father," she gently answered; "that is what I want to know. Why did Hawks come here? But I know one thing; he was a detective, and came to arrest a man."

"Yes. He—he said so."

"Who was the man?"

"I don't know."

"You said he told you all about it."

"But thar ain't no man o' that name here."

"What was the name?"

Eliphalet knew that he ought not to tell, but

he seemed unable to prevent his tongue from uttering it.

"Cyrus Bunker," he answered.

"Do you know him?"

"No."

"Then he isn't a friend of yours?"

"No—oh! no."

"Then what you ought to do, father, is to go right to the sheriff and tell him all you know."

"Oh! I wouldn't do that!" cried Hodge, in alarm.

"Why not?"

"The man might be ketched."

"Don't you want him caught? Don't you want Daniel Hawks's murder avenged? Surely, you will not refuse to tell what you know. Come! I will go with you to see the sheriff."

"No! no!" groaned the wretched Gold Monarch; "I da'ssen't go—I da'ssen't!"

"Why not?"

Old Humility had borne all that he could, and the flood-gates of his fears and knowledge were suddenly thrown open. He rushed to the confession, and poured forth the words rapidly, excitedly, incoherently:

"Can't you see that I am Cyrus Bunker?" he cried. "Don't you see that the reason I da'ssen't go is because I am the man Hawks wanted? He didn't know it, an' I didn't tell him. I thought I had suffered enough. I never meant ter do it, nohow, an' I almost went wild in the prison, an' fer years I didn't dare ter look men in the face fer fear they would recognize me. Don't ye see now why I da'ssen't meet the commissioners about the county-seat? They are men who live in the busy world, an' they might know me. I never touched him, an' don't know who did. He give me the key, but I never went nigh the hotel. I'm sorry fer him, but, ef I go ter them an' tell a part, I must tell *all*; an' ef the case o' Cyrus Bunker is brought up, an' the newspapers git it, Honeysuckle will soon be full o' detectives, an' some on 'em will recognize me. Don't ye see? Go ter them? No, no; an' ef you force me ter tell, you will send me ter the gallows!"

The Gold Monarch had made the disconnected statement almost frantically, and tears rolled down his cheeks like rain. His big hands had closed over Agnes's with painful force, and if he had been pleading for life to an enemy, instead of to a loving daughter, he could not have pleaded more piteously.

Agnes was stunned. Too much overwhelmed to remember her role of comforter, she gasped:

"Send *you* to the gallows!"

"Yes, yes; it was me who did it!"

"Oh! father, father! this *cannot* be true!"

"I did it, but I didn't mean ter, an' didn't know I did; but they proved it, an' it must be so."

"I will not believe it!" cried the girl.

"Thar ain't no use; I've tried not ter believe it, myself, but it ain't no use."

"Do you mean," Agnes asked in a whisper, "that you *killed* some one?"

"They proved it, but I didn't mean ter."

"I do not believe it! I *will* not believe it! You do harm to any one? No, no; impossible! I will never believe it—never, never!"

Her first dismay had passed away, and in its place was a firmness surpassing her ordinary nature by far. She had unbounded faith in her father—a grand, noble faith—and it made her a heroine at that moment. She stood erect, and her face was a picture which an artist might have coveted for a model.

Eliphalet had not that faith, and he shook his head soberly.

He was glad that the confession had been made, for he was sure of her sympathy, but even that could not change the terrible facts of the case.

"Father," Agnes added, "who was it that they say you—you—"

She could not utter the words, but he understood.

"Percival Drew," he answered.

"Who was he?"

"A man I knowed afore ever you was born— afore I came West."

"Tell me about it."

"I owed him money an' couldn't pay, an' he pressed me sore. One evenin' he met me in the road, an' when I said I had no money, he tried ter stab me with a knife. I took it away, an' I did strike him some with my fist, but never once with the knife; but he was found dead, cut in the side with the weepson, an' they said I did it—"

"Even if you had, it was in self-defense!" cried loyal Agnes.

"Ah! I couldn't prove that! I made a mistake, at the start, in not tellin' when he was found dead how he had attacked me! I kept still, but they found out that we had fit, an' then they would not b'lieve that he had started it."

"Was he really murdered?"

"He must 'a' been; the knife must 'a' done it when we tussled over it; but the good Lord knows that I never struck him on purpose with it."

"That was accident, not murder."

"They would not 'low it."

"What followed?"

"I was tried an' sentenced ter prison fur life—"

"Just heaven!"

"But I didn't stay. Thar was an insurrection o' the pris'ners, an' many on 'em escaped. I didn't take no part in it, but when the way o' escape was open, I was not foolish enough ter stay. I left: fled by night an' skulked in the bushes by day like a wolf, half-naked an' more than half-starved; an' finally reached the West. Then I changed my name an' tried ter forgit the past, but I ain't never seen an hour sence but I was afraid!"

"Father, you cannot under any circumstances be held guilty."

"But they said I did it."

"I will not believe it!"

The door suddenly opened; there was the rustle of female garments; and, turning, they saw Madame Mystery there, a vengeful expression on her face. Then, in a hard voice, she exclaimed:

"Here is one who believes that you killed Percival Drew!"

CHAPTER XXXII.

MADAME MYSTERY'S FORTUNES.

SILENCE followed the announcement. It was not a pleasant discovery to know that Spitfire Nell had been listening, but the greater part of the alarm fell upon Agnes. Eliphalet had told no more than Madame Mystery knew before, and he perceived her with a degree of apathy. Agnes, however, was dismayed.

The Far-Seer calmly advanced.

"I happen to know that this man murdered Percival Drew!"

She pointed dramatically at Old Humility.

"It is false!" cried Agnes.

"Has he not confessed it?"

"He denies it!—certainly he denies it!"

"Be at ease, dear Miss Hodge; I have listened, but have heard nothing new—except his weak attempt to clear himself. I am in his confidence; it was because of that he took me into his house. He dared not keep me out!"

"Are you a blackmailer?"

"I am an avenger!"

"Of whom?"

"Percival Drew."

"What was he to you?"

"He was my father!"

"He was?" returned Old Humility, quickly.

"Why, he never had but one child."
"You are wrong. He was married, and his wife died and left one child, Redmond Drew. But he married again—at least, there was a ceremony. Percival Drew was my father, but he was a scoundrel. My mother was not his social equal, and he asked for a secret marriage. Shortly before he died she learned that he had imposed upon her by presenting a sham minister. My mother demanded that the ceremony be repeated, and he promised that it should, but his death stopped the act of justice. Do you see now why I hate you?"

"What had I ter do with that?"

"Everything. Dead men can't marry, and when you killed Percival Drew, you took away our last hope. Not one dollar of his money ever came to us."

"Is that what you think of?" Agnes demanded.

"Isn't it enough? You, with your thousands, may not know the value of money, but I do. When your honest father escaped from State's Prison my mother was dying. She made me promise to find Percival Drew's assassin and be revenged upon him. I promised. At that time I was only a child, and did not realize what either the request or the promise meant, but in later years I did realize. Then I renewed my vow, and I have never faltered in my purpose."

Agnes was looking at the woman with anything but a friendly gaze.

"What is your purpose?" she asked.

Spitfire Nell pointed to Old Humility.

"To be revenged upon him!"

"Father, do you hear that?"

"Yes," humbly replied Hodge.

"Why do you not order her from the house?"

"Because he dares not!" Nell retorted. "I forced him to let me come here, and he dares not send me away."

"Why not?"

"Because I shall spread his secret broadcast."

"Yet, you threaten to take revenge, anyhow?"

"Yes."

"What does he gain by letting you stay here?"

"A reprieve—nothing more!"

Madame Mystery answered with perfect self-possession. She did not fear that she would be ordered out; she felt able to keep her place as long as she saw fit, and sway the Gold Monarch and his daughter according to her will. She had cowed him, and Agnes was only a mere child.

The latter was showing strength for which no one would have given her credit. She was thoroughly calm at last, and the gaze which she bent upon the intruder was thoughtful and analytical. If she had been a man, Spitfire Nell would have been ordered to go at once, but she knew that Old Humility was not the proper

person to play a game of wits with a shrewd and vicious woman.

The Gold Monarch had taken a seat, and he now sat by the table, his head leaned upon his hand, in a very dejected attitude.

There was nothing belligerent in his nature.

"Well, Miss Hodge," spoke Nell, at last, with fine sarcasm, "what do you think?"

"Many things," Agnes quietly answered.

"Name one!"

"You will excuse me."

"Do you order me out?"

"No!"

"I thought you wouldn't."

Nell spoke with triumph, but did not provoke any reply. Agnes saw that it would be the height of folly to argue with or waste words upon her, so she turned away and sat down near her father.

"Am I in the way?" Nell added.

There was no reply.

"Oh! very well; I am not disposed to be cruel, and will leave you alone. I know that, twist and turn as you may, you cannot oust me; and I'm willing you should consider the case of Dan Hawks all you wish to."

Still there was no answer.

"On the whole, Miss Hodge," the speaker continued, "I do not think you will advise your father to go to the sheriff with the key and his story. I should say *not*! You may believe what you please, but it is as clear as day how the detective died. When he had locked himself in, no human being save Eliphalet Hodge could enter. Comments are unnecessary! I will bid you good-night!"

Madame Mystery bowed as though in the presence of royalty, and then went out and closed the door. Father and daughter were left to themselves.

The following morning found the scene unchanged. Nell remained at the Gold Monarch's house, and no one made a move toward sending her away. The Hodges had consulted and decided that they were practically helpless for the time. Some way might be found to baffle her, but they did not see the way then.

She did not force hostilities. Her mind was on the money she was to get from Old Humility—if she did get it. Until that was secured, she would do well to fly light. Revenge would be but small satisfaction unless it was accompanied with pecuniary gain.

Her vendetta was the most selfish of selfish schemes. Never during the past or present had she blamed Hodge for the deed of killing Percival Drew, in itself, but merely because Drew's death left her and her mother adrift. For Drew, himself, dead or alive, she had no feeling, but, nevertheless, her hatred was bitter toward Eliphalet.

The forenoon had partly passed when there was an arrival at the house. Wyoming Zeke, Childeric Hall and Lorraine Wilberley drew up in front of the door. The Hodges and Madame Mystery were in the front room, together, but none of them saw the new-comers.

Partially realizing the situation, Ralston determined to give them a surprise, and their first warning was when the travelers opened the door and entered unannounced.

Then there was a scene of confusion. Agnes indulged in the mood of rapturous excitement peculiar to her sex on such occasions, and hastened to meet Lorraine.

For awhile they were the central figures, but there was some by-play. Zeke remained as cool as ever, and his observing gaze was not long in discovering Nell.

It was a profound surprise, for he had as soon thought of seeing the Evil One there, but he was less moved than the Far-Seer. She looked dismayed, and then flushed deeply.

She feared and loved the Hotspur, and either emotion was enough to make his arrival a misfortune. If he learned her status in the house she would forever lose all chance of winning him, while if he saw fit to take up the gauntlet of war against her, he would be more dangerous than all the others, combined.

Quickly recovering her self-possession, she advanced to meet him, extending her hand.

"Let me welcome you back!" she said, warmly.

He barely touched her hand.

"Thanks!" he replied, calmly.

"You are surprised to see me here?"

"I am."

"I will explain, later; please do not refer to it until we can speak privately."

"You must have received your invitation to this house from *yourself*!" he returned, bluntly.

"I did."

"Then you have put on the screws?"

"Hush!"

"All right!—happy to oblige a lady, but you will bear in mind that Eliphalet Hodge is my friend."

There was a menace in the remark which she could not fail to see.

"Am I not your friend, too?" she asked softly, plaintively.

"Handsome is as handsome does," was the critical reply. "By your deeds will I judge ye.

If I don't quote that right, fill in the vacuums and other waste places."

Old Humility, forgetful of his own troubles for awhile, was listening with rapt attention to Lorraine's hurried summary of her adventures, and he called to Ralston at this point in his heartiest manner.

"Zek'l, you are a trump-card! Glad ter hear how you've conducted yerself. You're a reg'lar border hero!"

"Give credit where it's due, my good sir. I tried to help, but proved to be only an aid. We'll let that pass; the chief point is that Miss Wilberley is back."

"An' welcome as flowers in May!"

"Right you are, sir!"

This hearty approval was not well received by one person there. Spitfire Nell flashed an angry glance upon him, and then gave one of like character to Lorraine. Neither was seen by the object thereof, but there was venom enough in them to disturb an ordinary person.

The Far-Seer hated Lorraine, and knew that she would never be sure of Zeke until her rival was out of the way.

At last the whole party sat down. Nell was ignored. Some of the others did this intentionally, and others without thinking, but she had no tears to shed. She withdrew to one of the windows and sat down with a book in her hand.

Now and then, in the minutes which followed, she turned a leaf, but it was all for effect. Not a line did she read; her eyes were eagerly drinking in what was said. Really, she heard little that could aid her or injure those whom she hated, but the watch was kept just the same.

Now and then Zeke sent a glance her way. He had a word to say to the lady, and did not want to delay the conference. When the party arose he saw his opportunity. Hodge and Hall were going to the office, and Agnes and Lorraine wished to go up-stairs.

"I will entertain Madame Mystery," Ralston calmly announced.

No one was disposed to deny him the pleasure, and they were left alone. He went quietly to her side.

"Sinners' feet stand on slippery places," he remarked. "As you and I are not sinners, we may fall. Miss Nell, how in perdition did you get into this house?"

"By request. I told Hodge that I wanted to come, and he did not refuse. You know why."

"What do you intend to do?"

"Have a good home for a few days."

"Is that all?"

"Isn't it enough? Zeke, why will you misjudge me? I may not be perfect, but I am a woman. Heaven knows that I would suffer anything rather than have you despise and blame me! Don't—don't do that!"

She spoke piteously, and her really fine eyes filled with tears. She laid her hand upon his, and her manner was appealing in the extreme.

"Madam," he steadily answered, "I hope you will not blame me, or think the worse of me, when I say that I know your present emotion is not genuine. Pray don't try theatricals upon me. Let's get right down to hard-pan and have a square talk. We understand each other, I think!"

CHAPTER XXXIII.

CONCERNING A CRY AT NIGHT.

SPITFIRE NELL bore these pointed remarks as calmly as she could. She was angry, but her game must be played on one line; there was no choice as to that.

She sighed deeply, and looked pathetically at Ralston.

"Say on!" she answered.

"You are in this house as the enemy of Eliphalet Hodge. He is my friend. I cannot permit him to be injured, bodily, in reputation, or—financially!"

"Have you no thought of me?"

"What can you expect?"

"I expect—I demand the right to speak before I am condemned!" Nell firmly answered.

"Speak, then!"

"You ought not to condemn me unheard. You give all credit to Eliphalet Hodge, and none to me. Is that just?"

"Allow me one question: Are you, or are you not, persecuting him willfully?"

"I am not!"

"What, then, is your object? Why are you his enemy?"

And Nell answered with thrilling vehemence:

"Because he murdered my father!"

"Your father!"

"Yes; Percival Drew was my father."

"Isn't this a new claim?" Zeke doubtfully asked.

"The fact may be new to you. There was no good in Drew. He palmed a bogus ceremony off upon my mother, but would have done her justice had he not been murdered by Hodge before he could do so."

"I do not admit that Hodge killed Drew."

"He admits it—only last night he said so, and his daughter heard him. More than that, evidence has been found to prove that Dan Hawks is dead; that he gave a key to Hodge, to enable

the latter to enter his room; and that the chance was accepted to Hawks's sorrow. All this Hodge has admitted—that is, nearly all."

Zeke was dumfounded. The statement, for all that he knew, might be one of mere concoction, but there were grave reasons for believing that a part, at least, was true.

"Now will you blame me wholly?" added Nell, in a voice of tender entreaty. "Don't!—in mercy's name, don't crush me utterly. Better death than harsh judgment at your hands!"

"Why should Hodge confess all this to you?"

"He did not!"

"Then how do you know of it?"

"He confessed to Agnes."

"How do you know?"

"I listened! Say that this was dishonorable if you will, but remember what I had at stake. Did not the end justify the means? He admitted that he killed Percival Drew. As to Hawks, he denied having injured him. How that was I don't know, but Agnes had happened upon evidence which indicates that the detective is dead. But he left a written statement to the effect that he gave that key to Hodge."

"Dead men do not usually write statements."

"Still suspicious! Listen, and then see how you wrong me."

The fair Far-Seer proceeded to vindicate her reputation by telling how she had listened at the door, and heard Agnes tell her father about the diary found by the stream. In fact, she gave a very clear account, and Zeke received new light, but not a word did he speak when she was done.

"Do you blame me now?" she added.

"Do you say that you are bound to have revenge upon Old Humility?"

The artful woman allowed her eyes to fall.

"I might be prevailed upon to forego the claims of those in the grave."

"Believe me, they make no claims. I boldly declare that Hodge did not murder Percival Drew!"

"Where is your proof?"

"Unfortunately, I have none; but I know that good old man too well to believe it. He would not do harm to any one. You do wrong in holding this grudge against him. Even if he did kill Drew, by accident or otherwise, you ought not to blame him for your ill-luck."

Nell sighed heavily.

"Don't you see it in that light?" Zeke added.

"My purpose wavers, but how will it be when I am alone, and your influence is no longer over me?" she pointedly asked, but her manner was outwardly all that modesty could demand.

"You ought to be able to hold to a good course, when it is once begun."

"And what will be my reward?"

"A clear conscience."

"And what will be his reward?"

"Peace and happiness."

"In other words, the man who, by his own confession, has committed the crime of murder, is to be left unpunished; to enjoy his wealth, the society of his daughter and his friends; while the woman whose life was blasted by his crime is to be doomed to poverty—to a life without friends or hope. Is this just?"

Sorrowfully the cunning Far-Seer presented her side of the case, but Zeke saw through her artifice easily.

"I still decline to believe him guilty," Ralston answered, "and do not admit that he enjoys more than he deserves. As for you, I see no reason why you should not have your friends, too."

"Who are they?"

"You ought to know better than I."

"You would not be willing to have me claim you, I fear, Mr. Ralston."

"I am the friend of all who deserve it, and you can in no way win my good opinion more quickly than by showing mercy to this simple, honest old man."

Nell again sighed deeply. There was nothing in Zeke's manner to give her hope. In fact, they might talk all day, and not come to a better understanding. Both were too observing, and too good judges of human nature to be deceived.

The re-entrance of Agnes and Lorraine interrupted the conversation, and Nell added in a low voice:

"When you make a request I feel my resolution waver. I do not understand your power over me, but I feel it strongly. I will delay decisive action until I see you again."

"That is wise!—that is womanly!"

He spoke approvingly, but she could not feel encouraged. His commendation was as insincere and selfish, in one sense, as her assumed meekness. They were playing for high stakes—she for his love; he for Old Humility's safety.

Zeke knew that with the three young women together there was danger of an explosion, figuratively speaking, and he would have remained to avert that trouble had he not known the folly of it. Clearly, he would do more harm than good; every civil word that he spoke to Lorraine would fan Nell's jealousy into new life.

Realizing this, he soon took his departure.

The story of Agnes's discoveries by the stream had led him to desire a personal view of the place. He might find more than she had done, and get a real clew to the mystery of Dan Hawks's disappearance.

He was on his way when, as he was passing the outer edge of the village, he was stopped by a woman. He knew her well. Her name was Norah Shaughnessy; she was an Irishwoman of middle age; she kept the Gold Monarch's office in good condition, and was a woman of honesty and of an even disposition.

"Misther Ralston, can Oi sp'ake wid yez?" she asked.

"Certainly, Norah," he responded.

"Oi bel'ave you to be a mon ave good judgment."

"Thank you."

"Oi'm in da'pe throuble, sor."

"I'll help you out if I can."

"Begorra, but it's not for meself at all; dhe worruld uses me well, an' goes seranely on. But Oi've that on me moind which is not so well."

"If you see fit to share it with me, I'll do my best to help you out."

Norah lowered her voice for the next sentence.

"Have they found Daniel Hawks yit?"

"No."

"Do ye know phat became ave him?"

"No."

"Oi'm afraid Oi do; Oi'm afraid he was murdered, accordin' to rumor."

"Why do you think that?"

"Oi'll tell yez; but Oi do it because you are a wise an' prudent mon, an' dhe sacret will be safe wid yez. It may not m'ane a thing, but Oi want it off me moind. You remember the noight Hawks disappeared?"

"Yes."

"That noight Oi was out late, havin' been at worruk in Misther Bartlett's new house. Some toime after midnight—Oi don't know whin; it moight have been wan, or two, or three o'clock, or less—Oi started home. Oi had got along near here whin I heard a rumpus in de bushes, an' voices, an' exclamations, an' blows as though some wan was fightin' wid 'aich ither. Thin Oi heard a voice cry out, sharp an' clear: 'Don't!—don't, Hodge!' Begorra, Oi was scared out ave me wits, an' away Oi ran loike as though dhe Ould Nick were after me; an' Oi did not stop until Oi was in me own primises."

She paused for breath.

"Well, what did you make of it?" Zeke asked. "Niver a thing did Oi make ave it thin, but whin they began to say that Hawks had been murdered, Oi remembered the cries in de bushes—'Don't!—don't, Hodge!'"

"Are you sure the name Hodge was used?"

"St. Pater! but if Oi hadn't been, Oi'd have told it long ago."

It was not hard to understand her. She was one of the stoutest of Old Humility's stout admirers, and would be as reluctant to believe ill of him as Zeke, himself. At the same time she could see what weight the words *might* have, with others, if made public.

She had kept them to herself for fear of unjustly casting a shadow upon Eliphalet, but her conscience had not been easy. She owed something to Hawks and humanity.

"You are sure this occurred the night that Hawks disappeared?" Zeke asked.

"Oi am."

"And the words were distinct?"

"They were, sor."

Ralston was silent.

"Now, sor," honest Norah added, "phat ought Oi to do? If harrum has come to Hawks, it would be a sin in me to kape this sacret, but if Oi could ave it—"

She came to a full stop.

Her silence spoke plainer than words, and Ralston understood. He questioned her further, drawing out all the information he could, but gained no more light. Neither openly referred to the fact that this story, if made public, would injure the Gold Monarch, but they understood each other. Norah wanted advice, and Zeke gave it. He asked her to guard and hold her secret for awhile, and promised to investigate and, later, see her again.

She went off in a better frame of mind, but the same could not be said of the Hotspur. The evidence which was constantly accumulating against Eliphalet Hodge worried this faithful friend.

He was still watching Norah when there was a rustling sound at one side, and he turned in time to see Deaf Drake coming out of the bushes.

"Fine woman!" quoth the vagabond, nodding in Norah's direction. "Married? Hay?"

"She is a widow."

"Widder, hay? Wal, that ain't bad. Ef ther is a man or woman in the world that is some pun'kins, it's widder. I like 'em; I do, by sin! S'pose she'd marry ag'in?"

"She is best qualified to answer that question."

"I'll ask her direckly, anon, pooty soon. What was that she said about Hawks an' Hodge, an' how one hollered ter t'other not ter do it?"

CHAPTER XXXIV.

DANGER APPEARS IN A NEW FORM.

WYOMING ZEKE heard this question with alarm. Deaf Drake had done good service in guiding him and his party through the mountains, after Lorraine's rescue, but there was a mystery about him. His deafness was either not genuine or very erratic, and it was an open question whether Eli was a mere vender of a cure-all salve, or something more.

His last question made Zeke look at him suspiciously, but Drake's face was placid and innocent.

"What are you talking about?" Ralston curtly asked.

"'Bout what the woman said."

"You dreamed it."

"I heerd her say she heerd Hawks sing out: 'Don't, Hodge, don't!'"

"Nonsense! Your ears played you false."

"When lovely woman speaks, even the deaf can hear. Thar is suthin' the matter with the drum an' fife o' my left ear, an' even the Egyptian Ointment can't cure it—though it's a wonderful cure, an' only a dollar a bottle; six fur five—but I heerd straight then."

"Norah said nothing of the kind!"

"Didn't she?"

"No, sir."

"It's a question o' voracity between us, an' I'll ax her when I see her ag'in."

"My friend, take my advice and attend to your legitimate business of peddling salve. By the way, why were you skulking in the bushes, acting the spy?"

"Do I drink old rye?" returned Eli, with a sudden return of deafness. "Thank ye; I don't keer ef I do take one horn with ye, mister."

"Never mind the 'mister.' I want to know—"

"Is it apt ter blister? Wal, some whisky is prone that way—it's mortally prone—but thar is a remedy right at hand. The Egyptian Ointment is prime for blisters, burns, boils, bruises—"

"Enough of your nonsense. Your sense of hearing is altogether too willful. Tell me at once, Drake, whether you mean to stand as my enemy or my friend."

"Yer friend? Why, sart'in I'll be that. Always was took with your style. You remind me o' a cousin o' mine a good 'eal, only he wore 'bout all his hair on his chin, an' yours is on top o' yer head. His nose was a monstrous sight bigger nor yours, but he wore it lapped over on one cheek, so it wa'n't in the way."

"You are a hopeless case, Drake; but I will say that I stand as your friend as long as you deserve it."

"Thank you; an' you'll never find old Deaf Drake goin' back on ye."

"Now you talk like a man. On the whole, I reckon you carry a warm heart under a ragged jacket."

"Yes, yes; I be quite a boy fur a racket, but not what I was once. Why, when I's young I was a reg'lar prodigal calf, and the amount o' liquid enthusiasm I could stow away was an envy an' a vexation o' spirrit to them who axed me ter moisten my brunkel tubes."

"Let me ask if you have sold any of your cure-all recently?"

"Not an artom; ain't had time. Want ter buy?"

"No, but I fear that there is a good deal of sickness and suffering at Cottoncliff, Mint Julep, Mule's Ear, and other towns north. If you go there at once, you may do a good business."

"I thank ye fur the hint, and I will go—later! Jest now, Honeysuckle suits me. Trade has been fair, an' I look fur outbreaks o' burns, bruises an' t'other things pooty soon. Mebbe I'll make money hyar; anyhow, I'll stick fur awhile."

Drake was as cheerful and innocent of appearance as ever, and Zeke saw that he was not to be induced to depart. He gave it up.

"I must leave you now, Eli, but I'll see you at the village. Good-day!"

He turned abruptly away, and made no answer to the vagabond's suggestion that he had better take a bottle of liniment along, to meet any emergency that might arise.

"What did he say?" muttered Drake. "I didn't jest ketch his reply—thought he mentioned red flannel, but I can't see why he goes ter the woods ter buy sech stuff."

Zeke's course was toward the stream where Agnes had found signs of Daniel Hawks. With the reputation of a tragedy hovering over the place, it was not one pleasant to behold, as he found on arrival.

The deep, dark pools looked disagreeable and striking. It was a fit place for evil deeds.

He had a knowledge of the art of trailing which was by no means to be despised, and his object was to discover how Hawks had come to the stream, if, indeed, he had been there. In Ralston's opinion, the finding of the hat and the diary did not necessarily prove that enemies had thrown the man into the stream. His own feet, and his free will, might have taken him there.

The tree which had recently fallen, as was mentioned in connection with Agnes's discovery,

was against Zeke. It covered valuable ground, and his field of operation was limited.

Going down on his knees he began to examine the earth carefully, but bushes and light leaves presented new obstacles. For half an hour, however, he was busy, and the result was encouraging.

Footprints were to be seen, but he believed that all had been made by one man. More than that, the tracks were certainly smaller than could be made by Hodge's big feet, and bore a greater resemblance to the trim shoe of Eastern style than the heavy boot of the mines.

On the whole, Zeke was more hopeful.

He had ceased work and was standing by the stream when a crackling of dead twigs announced the coming of another wanderer. He turned and saw a man only a few yards away.

It was fortunate that he was not nearer, for the discovery produced in Ralston's mind a surprise too profound to be concealed.

The new-comer was Daniel Hawks!

Yes; the supposed dead man was there in the flesh, and, as he advanced, there was no evidence of physical trouble. Zeke could not be deceived. He had not looked at him for so long a time, from behind the curtain in Madame Mystery's room, to be in error now.

The Hotspur's first feeling was one of great pleasure; Hawks was alive, and Old Humility could not be arrested for causing his death. Second thought dampened this joy somewhat. Hawks was in Honeysuckle for the avowed purpose of bringing Cyrus Bunker to the gallows, and he was alive to do it.

Ralston was not sure that the discovery gave him any pleasure.

Hawks came on, but not confidently. He eyed Zeke closely, and, it appeared, suspiciously. He had no means of knowing whom he had met.

"How are you?" he saluted, somewhat surlily.

"Very well, thank you," Zeke coldly replied.

"Fishing?"

"No."

Hawks looked narrowly at the ground.

"Have you found anything here?"

"Not a thing."

The detective came closer and, also, looked closer.

"What have you lost?" Ralston added.

"Never mind."

"Something is lost from the village."

"What?" asked the new-comer, curiously.

"A man named Daniel Hawks!"

"Humph! you know me, it seems."

"Yes."

"Have we ever met before?"

"I saw you casually at the village."

"What do they say of my disappearance?"

"They think it was odd."

"So it was, but it can be explained easily. Before I went to the hotel, that night, I encountered two toughs who set upon and tried to rob me. I resisted successfully, and they gave it up; but not until they had pounded me severely on the head."

"Did you recognize them?" Zeke quickly asked.

"No."

"Some one was heard to cry out, by a woman who was passing the bushes, up yonder."

"Probably it was I. A friend had just left me, and I did call his name, thinking he might be near."

Ralston drew a breath of relief; Norah's story was explained away. Hawks had appealed for Eliphalet's aid, and his words had been imperfectly understood by her.

"The pounding which I received made me bleed at the nose freely," Hawks continued, "but, as I was not bruised, I think the clerk saw nothing out of the way when I went to the hotel. I retired; went to sleep; but soon awakened with a most agonizing headache, caused, of course, by the pounding I had received. It finally became unbearable, and I arose, dressed and left the hotel quietly."

"Had your nose bled again?"

"Freely. I think it was on the pillow considerably."

Another mystery was explained.

"Leaving the hotel, I came straight to this place, knelt down somewhere here and bathed my head. I experienced no relief, and sat down to pass the time the best I could. Then came a blank, and, the next thing I remember, I was in the village of Solid Drift, in bed, flushed with fever and under a doctor's care. I had wandered there in an incoherent, crazy condition, but had been taken care of by those who well deserved to be called good Samaritans. Of course, all my trouble was caused by the beating I had received, and it was serious; I have only just been able to get back to Honeysuckle."

Zeke thought that he could not have come more inopportunistly.

"Why I asked you if you had found anything here," Hawks added, "may be explained by the fact that, somewhere during my wandering, I lost a valuable note-book. It would be idle to make a general search for it, for I do not know where I wandered; but I thought it might have dropped here."

"I have not found it," Ralston returned.

"Well, never mind the book; I am thankful to have my life left, and to be able to say that, after all my wanderings, I am back here."

Yes, he was back! That was just what worried Wyoming Zeke. Of course the detective would resume search for Cyrus Bunker, and Old Humility had enemies who would jump at the chance to betray his identity.

It would require great skill and good luck to save the Gold Monarch now!

CHAPTER XXXV.

THE CASE BECOMES CRITICAL.

Hawks again bestowed a critical glance upon Zeke.

"Do you live in Honeysuckle?" he asked.

"Yes."

"Then, of course, you know Eliphalet Hodge?"

"I count him one of my best friends," Ralston promptly responded.

"You look like a discreet man."

"Thanks! I hope I am."

"If you are Hodge's friend, perhaps you would be willing to do that which would be a favor to him and to me?"

"Certainly."

"I want to see him quietly. I will say that I did see him before my disappearance, and that we had begun negotiations which must now be finished. More than that, I want to do it quietly, so that Tom, Dick and Harry will not be onto our work. Can you suggest any way by which I can get a secret interview with him?"

Zeke did some rapid thinking. The one thing most necessary was to keep him away from Madame Mystery. To do this, he must also be kept away from Hodge's house. Another important point was to secure delay. The detective's unexpected return had put matters on a new footing, and some strategic work must be done. As there was no preparation for this, delay was vitally necessary. Time must be gained for thought.

"I think I can arrange it all right," the Hotspur answered, with an air of frankness. "Mr. Hodge is very busy just now, and could hardly spare time to see you, even if he could do so undiscovered by meddling eyes; but we can get over that. I will take you to my own room at the hotel, and, if we can get there unseen, no news of your arrival will get abroad. Then, when it is dark, Hodge can come to you."

"Excellent!" Hawks answered, in a tone of satisfaction. "I accept your kind offer, with many thanks."

"Then I will take you in charge at once."

"Do so, if you please."

They started for the village.

It became a point of great importance to get the detective housed unseen. If the news went abroad that he was back it would reach unfriendly ears, and any little pique would, perhaps, send Madame Mystery straight to him to reveal Old Humility's identity.

Zeke thought that he could smuggle Hawks in at the rear of the hotel; he tried it; he succeeded; he piloted the man to his own private room, left him there and started for Hodge's.

One advantage had been scored, but it was merely a reprieve of a few hours. How a complete and permanent victory was to be gained he could not see, as long as Nell and her friends were around. If they were off the scene, and Hawks left to his own resources, the case would look hopeful.

In any case, the time had come when Eliphalet must be informed that his secret was known to at least one friend, but that that friend still believed in him and stood ready to render any legitimate aid.

Another disagreeable surprise awaited the young man. Just as he reached Old Humility's house the door opened, a man came out, and he stood face to face with Norris Dayton.

Zeke, only, was surprised; a triumphant smile appeared on Dayton's face.

"Hallo! my fiery Hotspur!" he cried, with insolent familiarity.

Ralston bowed coldly and would have passed in silence.

"Say, your nibs," pursued the other, "when are we to fight that duel?"

Zeke paused and looked the questioner steadily in the face.

"You were the challenger, sir," he coldly replied, "but I named my second and told you to produce yours. Whenever you do so, I'm ready to deal with you."

"Courage don't waver a bit, eh?"

"What! for such a person as you?"

The contempt which Ralston threw into the cool, sarcastic retort made Dayton's face flush.

"Don't worry!" he growled; "my second will be around. If I have failed to send him it has been for want of time, not because I feared you!"

"I am glad to hear it. Your sudden departure from town looked very strange, but it is a pleasant surprise to know that you were not scared."

"Sneer on, if you will, but, old man, one thing you can swear to in safety—I shall beat you out with Miss Lorraine Wilberley. I've just been to see her!"

Again Dayton smiled triumphantly, but he

had said all that he cared to say. He was passing along when Zeke again spoke:

"How is your friend, Cole Boylston?"

"A murrain on that fellow! He has played me false and is my friend no longer. I hired him to steal Miss Wilberley—"

"You are bold to confess it."

"She will stand between me and harm. He stole her by my orders, but only to keep her for himself. I am not sorry you got her away. You did up Cole Boylston, however; he has a broken head, and is not likely to help or hinder me, in future. Perk Tuttle, too, is on the shelf with a jab in his ribs. But don't let me keep you—go to Lorraine!"

And Dayton resumed his retreat.

Ralston was thoroughly uneasy. The man's manner was that of one who feels himself master of the field, and he was unscrupulous enough for anything.

Entering, Zeke saw a servant and was about to ask where Mr. Hodge was. The girl was ahead of him.

"Miss Wilberley told me, sir, to tell you she wished you would come to her room at once, as soon's you came in, sir."

There was business to this summons, unless Ralston was in error, and it did not promise anything pleasant. He would have answered that call though countless dangers lurked by the way, and he went up-stairs immediately. He knew where to apply; he rapped, and Lorraine, herself, opened the door.

He had expected to see her in tears, but she was calm—unnaturally so, he thought. Her expression alarmed him; it was that of a person who has borne more than could be borne in safety.

"I received your message," he observed, kindly.

"Please enter!"

He obeyed, and she silently motioned toward a chair. He sat down, and then she spoke abruptly:

"Mr. Ralston, you ought to hate me after what has occurred in the past!"

"Hate you! Indeed, I have never had any but kind thoughts toward you."

"I refer to it with shame, but I said No to the proffered love of an honest man. Since then he has done me a great favor; and now I am about to turn to him as to an only friend. I who have wronged you so; I now ask your advice—your aid. Shame is strong within me, but I—I come to you humbly!"

Her once-proud head bent low, and her manner filled him with fresh dismay.

"In Heaven's name, Miss Wilberley, do not talk like that!" he cried. "I bear you only good will; let us forget the past. If I can help you in any way, command me as you would a brother!"

His hearty, sincere voice affected her deeply.

"You are kind!—you are noble!" she exclaimed.

"At least, I am your friend, and whatever I can do for you, I will do gladly. Speak!"

"I will, and that, too, without delay. I am placed in a position of great danger, and only prompt action can save me."

"Then lose no time. Say on, and then command me!"

"I thank you humbly, and will do as you say. What I have to tell is of the past—of that epoch in my life of which I have heretofore refused to speak. Now, necessity compels me to speak. You shall hear."

"You have heard the name of Redmond Drew mentioned in connection with mine; the same Redmond Drew whom you have also heard referred to as Benjamin Plymouth."

Lorraine paused, shivered as she thought of the Demon in the box, and then continued:

"There was a time when I knew him well. The charge has been made that there was a love affair between us; that I misused, and then cast him off. Such a charge is utterly false, and is the creation of an enemy."

"Norris Dayton," interpolated Zeke.

"The same. I knew Drew, and he did twice ask me to marry him, but I refused. I never liked him; I never gave him cause for hope; I always used him coldly after he developed such persistency in seeking my hand."

"I know that you have heard of the blowing up of the building, and the arrest of Redmond Drew for that deed. I will try to make plain what I know about it."

"When I was a school-girl I discovered that I had powers not possessed by every one. In brief, I accidentally put another girl into a sleep, trance, or whatever you see fit to call it—mesmerized her. This alarmed and annoyed me, and I never ran the risk again."

"About the same time I was afflicted with a trouble which I could not control so easily. From my eleventh to my fifteenth year, I used to 'walk in my sleep' occasionally. On reaching the age last named, this trouble seemed to cease."

"On the evening of the night when the building was blown up, Redmond Drew called upon me. I was not glad to see him, but I tried to act with civility. He led conversation to the case of James Wilberley and his alleged will. Uncle Eben and I were the heirs, but it was

said that nearly all this property had been devised to others. Drew said that such a will would be unjust, and though I told him that, having wealth enough already, I did not care where the old gentleman's money went, he harped upon the will continually until he left.

"That night the explosion occurred, and it was thought that the will was burned in the ruins.

"The following day Drew came to me with a strange story. He said that after leaving me, he had stayed out late, and was passing the building which was blown up an hour later, when he saw me, disguised as a man, leave it. He claimed that he followed me home.

"Of course I did not believe this, but I could not get rid of haunting fears. Was it possible that my old tendencies as a sleep-walker had returned, and that I had really gone?

"Later, Drew himself was arrested and charged with blowing the building up, on the testimony of one who claimed to have seen him enter the place. While in prison he preserved a mysterious air, gave the impression that he was keeping something back, and secretly sent word to me that he would preserve my secret at all hazards.

"I took no notice of this, and did not go near him. I did not yet believe his assertion that I had gone near the wrecked building. Finally, he was released for want of evidence, his chief accuser having broken down in his testimony. Once more a free man, Drew came to see me; reiterated that I had been to the building; and made a desperate effort to win me over, and gain a promise that I would marry him. I refused, and he abruptly went to the West. I never saw him again.

"A few days after it was decided that James Wilberley had left no existing will, I made a singular discovery. In my closet I found a pair of shoes long since discarded. I knew I had put them away—clean and unsoiled. I found them covered with dry mud, and, thrust far into one of them, I found James Wilberley's will.

"Imagine my surprise and alarm!

"The will was for, not against me. Instead of allowing Uncle Eben and myself to inherit his property equally, he had given me all. Until now, Mr. Ralston, I have never told any one of this discovery. I burned the will, and let Uncle Eben have the half of the property which he had inherited as heir-at-law.

"But the serious side of the case remains to be told. How came the will in my room? How had the shoes become mud-covered? Was it possible that, as a sleep-walker, I had made the journey claimed by Drew, and blown up the building? You can imagine how horrified I was!"

CHAPTER XXXVI.

THE SUNSET OF HOPE.

"It was a trick on Drew's part!" Ralston exclaimed.

"I do not understand," Lorraine replied.

"He put the will there, and covered the shoes with mud; his motive being to make you think you had done as he alleged, and thereby obtain a hold upon you and compel you to consent to marriage with him."

"But he could not gain access to my room."

"Was there no servant whom he could bribe?"

"It is possible."

"Depend upon it, such is the explanation!" Zeke confidently declared.

"Heaven grant that you are right—but I have never been able to think myself innocent; and as the explosion destroyed property of vast value, and the offender was being eagerly sought, I have never seen a happy moment since. Hiding my secret, I have expected arrest—disgrace. Think of it!"

Lorraine clasped her hands nervously, and her expression told of the misery she endured.

"You have done wrong to hide this secret," added Ralston, gravely.

"Why?"

"Because the legal mind of your uncle would have seen through the trick of your vicious suitor; you would have been shown that a servant had been bribed to place the false evidence in your closet; and said servant's confession would have put Drew hopelessly within the grasp of the law."

"I did not see this as you do. Something of the kind occurred to me, but if I told Uncle Eben, it must also be revealed that the will was against him. That influenced me."

"Well, if Redmond Drew is dead, he will never trouble you further."

"No; but some one else will."

"Who?"

"Norris Dayton!"

"Ah! is that knave active?" asked Zeke with a frown.

"He has asked for my hand, and, being refused, has demanded it. He says that he will dally no longer, and that unless I consent, he will at once betray me to the authorities, making oath that I destroyed the building. I am given four hours by him in which to decide."

Ralston was silent for a moment, but he saw the danger. Dayton had undoubtedly gone to the hotel. If he encountered Daniel Hawks, he

would probably ask the detective's aid, and as one explanation would naturally follow another, Hawks would soon become acquainted with more than one alleged fact now unknown to him.

This would bring both Lorraine and Old Humility into trouble, and the Gold Monarch, at least, would be arrested.

The danger must be averted. But how? How could it be done? He was still in doubt, but would not allow Lorraine to discover the fact.

"Be of good courage," he urged, as cheerfully as possible. "I will save you."

"You do not blame me for asking your aid?"

"Blame you! I commend your wisdom in asking an able-bodied man to look after Dayton, and I thank you for your confidence in me."

"You are very, very kind!" murmured Lorraine, brokenly. "But what will you do to baffle them?"

Sure enough! That was just what Zeke wanted to know. Lorraine and Hodge were both in danger. There was a dangerous complication at the hotel; there was another in Eliphalet's house, and would be, as long as Madame Mystery remained there. Clearly, the first step must be to see the Gold Monarch. No advantage was to be gained by rushing back to the hotel, for if Hawks kept his room, Dayton would not see him.

So the Hotspur went to Mr. Hodge, and calmly, briefly, plainly, yet kindly, let him know that his secret was no longer locked within his own mind.

The revelation was more calmly received than might have been expected. Eliphalet knew that he had a good friend in Zeke, and, now that such a thing was not to be avoided, it was rather a relief to share the secret with him, and feel that he could ask advice of one so strong-minded and perspicacious.

He told the same story related to Agnes.

He had owed money to Percival Drew, but a long series of misfortunes had prevented him from getting means to pay. If Drew had waited, all would have been well, for the Cyrus Bunker of that day was not less honest than the Eliphalet Hodge of Honeysuckle fame, but the man did nothing of the sort. Meeting Bunker one night, he assaulted him with a knife, and was only kept from doing violence by several stout blows. They finally separated, and Drew seemed none the worse for the encounter, but, the following day, was found dead with a knife-wound in his body. Bunker was arrested and sentenced for life to prison, but escaped and made for the West.

Such was the story, and the Gold Monarch could only avow his innocence, not only of crime, but of all knowledge of how Percival Drew had been killed.

When told that Hawks was at the hotel he had a fit of trembling. No picture, or description of any reliability being extant of him, there was not much fear that Hawks would suspect him if left alone, but Honeysuckle was full of enemies eager to betray the unfortunate man the moment that their selfish motives demanded.

While they were still talking a servant appeared and announced that Madame Mystery wished to see Mr. Hodge. The latter was about to answer that he was engaged, but Zeke made a quick gesture, and the old man changed his mind.

He returned word that Nell could come to him.

"Hev you an idee?" he asked, as the door closed after the servant.

"I have," Ralston quickly answered. "I want to hide in yonder closet and act the listener. I don't know what the woman is coming for, but I want you to make her express her blackmailing claim in my hearing, and then leave her to me."

"I'll do it."

Zeke barely had time to retreat to the closet before Nell appeared. She came dressed in her best, with a grand sweep and rustle of skirts, but Zeke, looking out of his hiding-place, saw that her expression was hard and determined.

"All alone, eh?" commenced the visitor.

"Not now you're hyar," Old Humility replied.

"Don't be funny. I don't like facetious folks, and there are some who can't be smart if they try."

"True," he agreed, meekly.

"I'm here on business!" Nell announced, in a tone which confirmed her assertion.

"Be you?"

"I am. I find clouds piling up against the sky, and though I hope to pluck the fairest fruit on the boughs, I am determined to make sure of the short ears."

This mixed-up metaphor was not so plain to Eliphalet as it might have been, but what followed was to the point.

"In brief, I want the five thousand dollars which you have promised me," she added.

Evidently she did not need any of the leading on of which Ralston had spoken.

"I ain't got the money now," Old Humility answered.

"Bah! that won't go down!"

"Eh?"

"The idea of the Gold Monarch not being able to raise a paltry five thousand!"

"I mean that I ain't got it here. I kin raise it, o' course."

"How soon?"

"Are you bound ter make me pay this?"

"No! I merely make a business proposal. If you give me the money I will keep your secret sacredly; if you refuse, all Honeysuckle shall soon know that you are, really, Cyrus Bunker, murderer and escaped convict. Do as you please!"

She spoke in an abrupt, indifferent manner, and made a pretense of not looking at her intended victim. She felt sure of the ground beneath her feet, and was as inexorable as fate.

Zeke Ralston had heard enough. Frank as she had been with him before, in the way of confession, he had desired personally to hear her make the demand upon Hodge. This he had done, and he now opened the closet door and boldly made his appearance.

There was nothing in the sight which could dismay Nell, after what had gone before, but she did look alarmed—alarmed not by detection, but by the presentiment that she had been deliberately trapped. If that was so, the Hotspur was about to enter the field as her foe.

He bowed with marked politeness.

"Excuse me, madam," he said, quietly, "but with your permission, I will talk for Mr. Hodge. I am his attorney in the matter!"

Nell looked at him in silence. Had she really lost all hope of winning him? If so, she was determined to fight him to the bitter end.

They were not destined to have the interview then. Again the servant appeared, and the announcement was made:

"Three gentlemen to see you, sir!"

"Yea, yea!" added a nasal voice from the hall; "we are come, like David, armed with a sling, a pebble gathered from the brook, and the armor of righteousness. Yea, yea!"

And into the room marched the Reverend Mr. Gadeley, followed by Norris Dayton and Daniel Hawks, detective.

Eliphalet Hodge grew very pale, and even Wyoming Zeke was speechless. The dreaded meeting between Dayton and Hawks had taken place, and there was only one way to construe their mission.

"The wicked man goeth abroad seeking whom he may devour," deposed Gadeley, "but the power of the Enemy of man hath a limit. Even so! Yea, yea!"

Dayton flashed a triumphant look upon Ralston, and nodded in a satisfied and knowing way.

"What means this intrusion?" Zeke sternly demanded.

"Hawks, speak out!" cried Dayton, mockingly. "Let the dear boy know why we are here!"

Madame Mystery shut her teeth hard and glared angrily at the speaker; she knew then that she would never handle the five thousand dollars. But Dan Hawks, downcast and nervous, advanced a step toward Old Humility and sheepishly muttered:

"Mr. Hodge, pray excuse me, but I arrest you in the name of the law for willful murder!"

CHAPTER XXXVII.

A NEW HAND AT THE HELM.

"YEA! yea!" added the Reverend Mr. Gadeley, with an alarming nasal drawl; "so cometh the evil to the pricks and stings which hovereth in wait for the children of Belial. And if any man sayeth otherwise, let us answer, nay! nay!"

Eliphalet Hodge sat like one dazed in front of the detective, but Wyoming Zeke, though he saw no light ahead, was not to be cowed. He gave Hawks an indignant glance, and sternly demanded:

"What do you mean, sir, by such nonsense?"

"Mr. Dayton has revealed the truth to me, sir," Hawks stiffly answered.

"Yes," added Norris, jubilantly, "and he knows how you have tried to deceive him, warn Hodge and baffle justice!"

"Scoundrel!" Zeke exclaimed.

"We are scoundrel-catchers."

"Hawks," persisted Ralston, rallying for a great effort, "surely you cannot be in earnest!"

"I am! I arrest Hodge for murdering Percival Drew, over twenty years ago!"

"Yea, yea!" drawled the Reverend Mr. Gadeley. "So will it be writ in the records of time which man readeth in the future. Esteemed Mr. Hawks, shall I summon my witnesses?"

"Yes. We will show whether we are right or wrong!"

Hawks was not the worst man in the world, but, knowing that it had been a trick of Zeke's to shut him up in the hotel, he was in ill-humor, and prepared to serve Old Humility with all possible severity.

The parson stepped to the door and called the single word "Witnesses!" in a loud voice. There was a brief delay, and then three persons entered—Childeric Hall, Agnes and Lorraine. Zeke began to be puzzled, while bewildered Mr. Hodge looked in wonder. Were his best friends to turn against him?

"You smuggled me into a remote room," ut-

tered Hawks, severely, addressing Zeke, "but chance gave Dayton the clew. He soon told me the truth, and, as we were leaving the hotel, we run upon the Reverend Mr. Gadeley. Even that preacher of the Word is against you!"

"Yea, yea!" Gadeley agreed, sanctimoniously. "And if a man smite thee on the right cheek, turn to him the left, also."

"Come to the point!" sharply directed Dayton. "I will," Gadeley answered, with less of the nasal twang. "Hodge is arrested for killing Percival Drew, twenty odd years ago. Childeric Hall, give your testimony!"

"Within the last hour," cried Hall, in a ringing voice, "I have been told by a reliable person that a man at Hodge's old home has died and left a confession that he, not Hodge, killed Drew!"

Dead silence followed these words. Eliphalet and his friends considered them too good to be true; Dayton and Hawks were dismayed and angry on hearing a statement so different from what they expected.

"It's a lie!" Dayton finally snarled.

"It is true," Hall repeated.

"If so, I don't think Mr. Hodge will be arrested!" exclaimed Ralston.

"Where is the proof?" demanded Dayton. "I say it's a vile lie. Where is the proof—where is the witness?"

"Here!" answered the Reverend Mr. Gadeley, as unmoved as a rock.

"You?"

"Yea, yea!"

"What do you know about it?"

"I know the Gold Monarch is absolutely cleared."

"It is false!" hotly put in Hawks. "This is a plot to baffle me, but it won't work. Who are you, anyhow?"

"A humble, wandering parson, but a man of vast knowledge and honor. Yea, yea! Verily, and with truthful veracity and accurate fact. Yea, yea! You shall see!"

With a quick motion the alleged person unbuttoned his long coat and flung it off. Then away went a wig, and a man of "shreds and patches," and of many rags, stood before them. "Deaf Drake!" muttered Dayton, in amazement.

"Will thar be a wake?" returned Eli, in the old, husky whisper. "No; thar won't be no wake. Elder Gadeley is so dead that even the Royal Egyptian Ointment won't save him, though it's a mighty good thing fur burns, boils, bruises an' bunions; price only one dollar a bottle, six fur five. It's the darnedest best medicine out—it is, by sin! I've been peddlin' it fur between nineteen year, goin' on eighteen, an' I know."

"What has this ragged fool to do with the case?" Dayton blustered.

"Peace, fool in good clothes!" Drake coolly replied. "Hawks, observe!"

Throwing back his ragged coat, the speaker revealed a glittering badge.

"A detective!" gasped Hawks.

"And my name is Silas Howard."

"Perdition!"

"In brief, you and I have been working on the same case. That I have beaten you was owing to the fact that you started in the dark, and I in the light. I came here disguised as Deaf Drake, and, at times, masqueraded as Parson Gadeley, but you can all know me now as Silas Howard, detective!"

Gone were both the husky whisper of Eli Drake and the nasal tone of Gadeley, and the man spoke in a clear, ringing, well-modulated voice.

Hawks was overwhelmed, but Dayton exclaimed:

"I won't believe it!"

"Nobody cares what you believe!" Howard retorted. "I will deal with you presently. Hawks, soon after you left the East old Elbridge Nelson died, leaving a confession that Percival Drew died by his hand. After Drew's fight with Cyrus Bunker, alias Hodge, that fatal night, he met Nelson. Both were partially drunk; they quarreled, fought, and Drew was killed. It was not murder, but homicide, yet Nelson always kept his secret until on his death-bed. Mr. Hodge, let me congratulate you—"

"May the good Lord be praised!" murmured the Gold Monarch, brokenly.

Agnes threw her arms around his neck.

"Nelson's confession caused me to investigate the Drews," Howard continued, "and I soon made another discovery. Percival Drew's son, Redmond, was once under arrest for blowing up a building, but was released for want of evidence. I investigated; I proved that he was guilty!"

There was a sudden, gasping cry from Lorraine.

"It is false!" again exclaimed Dayton.

"Peace, knave!" contemptuously responded Howard. "I have you on the hip, too. Since I came to Honeysuckle, I have gained some clews, and they will put you in a box. Redmond Drew blew up the building, but he first stole the will of old James Wilberley. Then he bribed a servant who was in Lorraine's employ to cover a pair of shoes with mud, and put them

and the will in Lorraine's room. It was his object to get her in his power, but he failed, in the end, and came West. He died here."

"He sent his bones to Ralston," sneered Dayton, but the speaker's confidence was vanishing.

"He did not!" Howard declared. "Redmond Drew's body was buried intact, like other bodies. The Demon of the Box was a contrivance made by Drew, alias Benjamin Plymouth, in the last weeks of his life. He left a confession—"

"He did not!" cried Dayton.

"I have the paper in my pocket," was the calm retort. "You buried it with him, but I have it now. In this paper, signed by him, he confesses that he blew up the building deliberately, urged on by no one, but with the hope of winning Lorraine. His scheme failed; he is dead; she is free from all suspicion!"

"Thank Heaven!" she breathed.

"When I came here as Deaf Drake," Howard pursued, "I set out to get into your good graces. I became the confidant not only of you, but of Madame Mystery and Cole Boylston. Some damaging things you deliberately uttered in my hearing, but more I have learned by playing the listener when you and your allies talked."

"Traitor! I'll be even with you yet!"

"No; you never will, Norris Dayton! The law wants you, and it is my good fortune to arrest you. My word for it, you will not have liberty again in twenty years!"

He turned to Madame Mystery. She arose, pale but calm. She knew that all her plans were ruined, but bore it with great outward composure.

"What is my sentence?" she asked.

"I can't say. You are a schemer; you are full of evil; but unless you are held for attempted blackmail, I do not know how I can detain you."

Wyoming Zeke moved forward and grasped Howard's hand.

"Sir, words can but poorly express our feelings," he warmly exclaimed. "You have done nobly, and I thank you from the bottom of my heart!"

"Hey? Will it cure a smart?" returned the detective, falling into the husky whisper of Deaf Drake. "Sartain it will, an' all burns, bruises, boils, bunions, an' scattery Price only one dollar, or six for five. It's a good Ointment—it is, by sin! Fur further partic'lars, I refer you to Parson Gadeley. Yea, yea!"

"Clown!" sneered Dayton.

"True! Observe a clown's way!"

Turning swiftly upon Mr. Dayton, the victorious detective had handcuffs upon his wrists before he could resist. Then he turned to the Gold Monarch and took his hand.

"Arise, Eliphalet Hodge!" he directed. "You, who were never guilty of any crime, can now look your friends in the face without a fear."

"Praise the Source of all good!" murmured Old Humility, gratefully.

And then his other friends came to congratulate him, and there was an amount of joy in the room that offset Dayton's rage, Spitfire Nell's bitter disappointment and Dan Hawks's chagrin.

Three months later.

Justice found no cause for delay in Dayton's case, and he was tried promptly and sentenced to forty years in prison on an accumulation of charges. Report says that his health is failing there.

Cole Boylston died of wounds received in the fight on the knoll, and Perk Tuttle was hopelessly crippled by injuries at the same time.

After a long deliberation, Spitfire Nell was allowed to go. She went to San Francisco, fell into trouble there, and is now serving a three years' sentence in prison.

Dan Hawks went home disappointed, but not disgraced. He had been beaten by a fellow-detective, but the victor was generous in his triumph.

Eben Wilberley recovered his health, but was never told that the will would have deprived him of his share in his deceased relative's estate. The lawyer was a worthy man, and Lorraine had enough money as it was.

The reader hardly needs to be told that Lorraine became Mrs. Zeke Ralston, and that Agnes married Childeric Hall. The last couple remained at Honeysuckle, while the former returned to the East. All is well with them.

There was another meeting in regard to the county-seat. That time the Gold Monarch was there, and he won the prize. Honeysuckle bids fair to have an immense boom now that it has the honor of being the county town.

Old Humility is as happy and contented as a child. He keeps the name of Eliphalet Hodge, and will never resume that of his younger days. He is the happiest man known in all that section; the friend and benefactor of all; and the idol of his friends, rich and poor alike.

Mounted on the gaunt mare, Polly, ragged Deaf Drake one day left Honeysuckle. Mr. Hodge was deeply affected, but was consoled by the promise that the detective would visit him often, while engaged in peddling ointment and capturing law-breakers.

THE END.

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